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**Living No Girls' Teenage Dream:  
Young Motherhood in MTV's Teen Pregnancy Franchise**

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**Living No Girls' Teenage Dream:  
Young Motherhood in MTV's Teen Pregnancy Franchise**

**BY**

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**Thesis**

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## **Abstract**

### **Living No Girls' Teenage Dream: Young Motherhood in MTV's Teen Pregnancy Franchise**

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This thesis explores theories of postfeminism and discourses of “can-do” and “at-risk” girlhood as they are enacted in MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise, which I define as including *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*. Specifically, this project examines how MTV frames the young mothers featured across this franchise as what I label “postfeminist failures.” Within its teen pregnancy programming, MTV exploits the shortcomings of the featured teen mothers. These failures include broken relationships, prison sentences, and subsequent pregnancy scares and pregnancies. Furthermore, these failures all stem from the teen mothers’ initial failure to adequately manage her sexuality, as evidenced by getting pregnant at age sixteen. These failures constitute much of the plot of MTV’s docu-dramatic series and have also spilled over into paratexts related to MTV’s franchise. I contest in this thesis that the rhetoric of postfeminist failure, first articulated and exploited in *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*, is then reproduced in the franchise’s paratextual materials. These paratexts range from reunion shows hosted by Dr. Drew Pinsky to tabloid magazine coverage. I also interrogate the celebrity status of MTV’s featured teen mothers, especially those on *Teen Mom* and *Teen*

*Mom 2*, and problematize publicity and fame rooted in the failure of these girls to adhere to normative standards of postfeminist womanhood.

MTV's teen pregnancy franchise is categorized as reality television, a genre derided by many scholars as lowbrow and devoid of substance. In order to combat these assumptions about reality television, particularly because this teen pregnancy franchise is promoted as educational for its audience, MTV has fostered strategic partnerships with The Kaiser Family Foundation's "It's Your (Sex) Life Campaign" and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Through these partnerships, MTV has infused its reality content with pathways to information-rich websites about contraceptives and pregnancy prevention sponsored by each non-profit. Through analyzing these partnerships and cultural discourses surrounding teen pregnancy, I question the assumption by many proponents and critics of the franchise that the content must either be educational for its viewers or purely entertaining programming.



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## INTRODUCTION

In March 2013, New York City's subways and bus shelters were the site of a citywide public service campaign: "The Real Cost of Teen Pregnancy." Plastered onto walls and windows, both above and underground, images of young toddlers talked back, quite harshly, to their teen parents:

*"Got a good job? I cost thousands of dollars each year."*

*"Dad, you'll be paying to support me for the next 20 years."*

*"Honestly Mom, chances are he won't stay with you. What happens to me?"*

*"I'm twice as likely not to graduate high school because you had me as a teen."*



Illustration 1: One of the four advertisements included in NYC's "The Real Cost of Teen Pregnancy" public service campaign, March 2013. Source/Copyright: NYC Human Resources Administration.

These statements were accompanied, as shown above, by images of distraught toddlers – the two boys featured appear to be Caucasian and the two girls African American – along with a statistic regarding the children of teen parents (the *reality*) in the yellow box. The one pictured above states: "Kids of **teen moms** are twice as likely not to graduate than kids whose moms were over age 22." In addition to the four visual advertisements, New York City's Human Resources Administration developed a multi-modal approach to this

campaign. One example of this approach includes the implementation of a text message alert system through which participants could follow the life of a teen mother and share in her experiences when her best friend called her a “fat loser” and she was “shunned by her parents” (Ellis).

It should not be surprising that “The Real Cost of Teen Pregnancy” campaign received negative critical attention. While posed as a “public health information campaign,” it privileged normative cultural tropes that denounced teen pregnancy as a form of sexual shaming (DasGupta). Sayantani DasGupta, a faculty member in Narrative Medicine at Columbia, commented on the campaign: “The accusatory ‘shame and blame’ narrative of these images is not only out of proportion to the ‘problem’ it seeks to address, but is weighed down by its obvious cultural narratives about teens of color, poverty, gender and sexuality.” DasGupta makes two important points: a) teen pregnancy is not as much of a menace as these ads make it out to be, and b) the visual component of the campaign plays into classed and racialized understandings of teen pregnancy in quite a reductive manner. Both DasGupta and journalist Blair Ellis also picked up on the individualized narrative espoused through these posters and recognized how the personal failure of teen parents is communicated clearly in these “scare ads” while the systemic reasons for such failures are left out of the discussion – namely the cycle of poverty and lack of access to education (Ellis). These problems are not isolated to this campaign, yet its succinct and visual nature allow entry into a much broader discussion of how shaming narratives are often used to represent and discuss the ever-present social issue of teen pregnancy.

This advertising campaign appeared to target teen parents, rather than just teen mothers. While one of the advertisements addressed the mother, another addressed the father, and only one statistical section delineated the teen mother as lacking because she became a mother at a young age. Overall, the rhetoric of this campaign appears to address a more gender-neutral population of teenagers that may become young parents. Yet, as this thesis explicitly addresses, teen pregnancy and the discourses surrounding it center on teen girls much more than their male counterparts. Hence this elision of the gendered nature of discourses around teen pregnancy by this campaign negate the “real cost,” and material consequences, of teen pregnancy, which is much higher for young females.

#### **OBJECT(S) OF STUDY**

In this thesis, my objects of study are *16 and Pregnant* (2009-), *Teen Mom* (2009-2012), and *Teen Mom 2* (2011-). I chose these programs because of their positioning on MTV and the fact that they are understood as commercial reality television. They have also been recognized as an “enduring cultural phenomenon” in scholarly work (Ouellette “It’s Not...” 248). In addition to the younger audience that MTV draws, I am particularly interested in this set of shows because new content is still emerging from them. These shows also played an interesting role in redefining MTV as a network and brand, which I will explore throughout this project, as these shows are programmed alongside other popular series such as *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012), *My Super Sweet Sixteen* (2005-2008), and *Catfish* (2012-).

*16 and Pregnant* is a show that is marketed as “an hour-long documentary series focusing on the controversial subject of teen pregnancy. Each episode follows a 5-7

month period in the life of a teenager as she navigates the bumpy terrain of adolescence, growing pains, rebellion, and coming of age; all while dealing with being pregnant.”<sup>1</sup> To date, forty-seven teen mothers have been profiled on the program over four seasons.<sup>2</sup> MTV describes *Teen Mom* in relation to stories that were first told on their original program: “In *16 and Pregnant*, they were moms-to-be. Now, follow Farrah, Maci, Amber, and Catelynn as they face the challenges of motherhood.”<sup>3</sup> *Teen Mom* features Farrah Abraham, Maci Bookout, Catelynn Lowell, and Amber Portwood. *Teen Mom 2* features Leah Messer, Jenelle Evans, Chelsea Houska, and Kailyn Lowry. *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* have aired four seasons each, and *Teen Mom 2* just concluded its fifth season in April 2014.<sup>4</sup>

A key difference between *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series is that the former focuses on one teen mother per episode, while the latter focuses on all four teen mothers over the course of an hour-long episode. Additionally, I see *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* as more ethnographic and anthropologically informed than *16 and Pregnant*, structured through what George Marcus has called a “following the thing” or “following the object(s)” methodology (91). This observation also stems from Mark Andrejevic’s claim that reality TV can be considered “anthropology TV;” he is specifically referencing *Big Brother* (2000-, CBS) when he makes this claim (124).

Lauren Dolgen created the concept for these programs. She, along with Morgan J.

---

<sup>1</sup> Description provided on the *16 and Pregnant* show page on MTV.com.

<sup>2</sup> This does not include Season Five, which premiered on April 14, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Description provided on the *Teen Mom* show page on MTV.com.

<sup>4</sup> This does not account for Season Five of *16 and Pregnant*.



Freeman and Dia Sokol Savage, have served as executive producers for each series that I analyze. Freeman is a veteran of MTV's reality programming, as he was also the executive producer of *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* for two seasons (2004-2006).<sup>5</sup>

Since *Teen Mom 3* premiered in late August 2013, it is included in this analysis to clearly point to continuities and discontinuities with the previous two series. I will not draw specific examples from the third iteration except to reinforce trends already seen in prior seasons or to mark important changes or differences in the content and contextualization of teen motherhood. Its cast includes Briana DeJesus (notably the first Latina, or girl of color, featured in any *Teen Mom* cast thus far), Mackenzie Douthit, Alexandria Sekella, and Katie Yeager.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, MTV's fifth season of *Teen Mom 2*, which began airing in January 2014, will be utilized in the same manner as *Teen Mom 3*, Season One.

This cluster of reality programs, all created by and aired on MTV, constitute what, for purposes of this thesis, I name "MTV's teen pregnancy franchise." Since the first episode of *16 and Pregnant* aired in 2009, MTV has found and sustained an audience for these docu-dramatic, reality television shows about teen pregnancy. The glimpse MTV provides into what are framed as the *real* lives of teen mothers has evolved both within and beyond the shows themselves, as the storytelling now extends outside MTV's purview. A seemingly endless amount of extra-textual material about the subjects of

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<sup>5</sup> Biographical information on Morgan J. Freeman provided by IMDB.com.

<sup>6</sup> I have intentionally used the maiden names of all featured teen mothers, as some have married, divorced, or had other changes in status. In the programs, each girl is referred to only by their first name.

these shows – the teen mothers being featured – circulates regularly in the tabloid press, on Twitter, and in exclusive content hosted on MTV.com. This expansion of the franchise will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

MTV is not the only stakeholder in this franchise of programming, as the shows are also affiliated with The Kaiser Family Foundation’s “It’s Your (Sex) Life Campaign” and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. These non-profit partnerships will be further analyzed in Chapter One, but an initial awareness of them is critical to establishing the discourses asserted through the franchise about the tensions of reality television with public interest programming, problems of adolescent sexuality, and teen pregnancy.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In this thesis, I use MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise as a vehicle to explore discourses surrounding teen pregnancy and issues that accompany it including discussions of girlhood and female adolescent sexuality. I look at MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise as a multi-faceted media text that not only produces the featured teen mothers as what I define as “postfeminist failures,” but also as one that continually reproduces that failure instead of emphasizing potentially successful moments. I ask, how does MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise produce the featured teen mothers as postfeminist failures? I interrogate this subject by examining MTV’s narrative structure and the storytelling techniques employed within *16 and Pregnant* versus *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. Following this first line of inquiry, I look at paratexts, as theorized by Jonathan Gray, of MTV’s franchise and question how these materials reproduce this same sense of

“postfeminist failure.” Particularly in regard to the reunion shows hosted by Dr. Drew Pinsky, how does each girl’s positioning on these specials replicate the notion that each teen mother is a postfeminist failure?

While the questions above are closely linked, I also look at the broader industrial context for MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise in order to parse out how these programs are intended for their audiences and how they are positioned within the larger institutional and industrial context of post-network era television. I see two competing themes – of ending teen pregnancy and also making a profitable franchise of programming – in MTV’s teen pregnancy’s content and examine how they co-exist. How are these dual objectives mitigated by MTV through their marketing discourse and as well as through their storytelling on *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*?

Pressing this second area of focus regarding educational reality television further, this thesis explores how MTV’s profit imperative influences the strategies it employs through its representation of social issues like teen pregnancy, adolescent sexuality, and pregnancy prevention. How do MTV’s partnerships with The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy affect the claim that this franchise is educational for its audience? Does the fact that this franchise is commercial television that appears on MTV, a cable channel guided by a profit motive, conflict with the educational value of this programming? In probing the tension between MTV’s profit motive and commercial imperatives (explored in Chapter One) versus the non-profits’ more socially grounded and clearly stated objective to prevent teen pregnancy, I mobilize theories of postfeminism and neoliberalism to shed light on this

complicated relationship and the potentially controversial and contradictory discourses that emerge because of these divergences.

### **WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL (RE: TEEN PREGNANCY)?**

Teen pregnancy, the broad social issue I focus on in this thesis, is just one of many youth-centered moral panics that are linked to what is understood as youthful delinquent behavior (Cohen 2002, Bettie 2003). The term “moral panic,” most notably theorized by Stanley Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002), evokes many images in which the “panic” is more of a metaphorical one and a signifier of social unrest (xxvii). Cohen’s objects of study are mods and rockers in the 1960s. Though teen pregnancy at the contemporary moment is quite differently imagined than the subcultures Cohen analyzes, the framework he utilizes to theorize moral panic provides a useful foundation for my own analysis.

The most recent moral panic surrounding teen pregnancy stems from a seeming abandonment by young women of traditional (and conservative) family values and a longstanding cultural discomfort surrounding their sexuality. Teen mothers are understood as deviant because having a baby is a “marker of adult status” that is traditionally understood as appropriate for a married woman (Bettie 69). As Cohen explains, moral panics develop when deviant behavior, which for teen mothers is most aligned with being sexually active, is stabilized as an “artefact of social control” (6). Cohen outlines five components to any definition of moral panic:

There must be a **concern** about an imagined threat that is received with **hostility** that causes moral outrage toward the embodiments of the defined problem. Once there is **consensus** that the threat is valid and does indeed exist, the threat is often presented **disproportionately** from reality [i.e. the rate of teen pregnancy is

exaggerated]. Lastly, the panic is **volatile**, often erupting without warning. (xxii, emphasis added)

Teen pregnancy, as a moral panic, is imagined as a threat to individualized social welfare, normative girlhood and adolescent female development, and conservative family values. When looking at how valued sexual abstinence within teen populations is for right-wing conservatives who tend to be proponents of family values in the United States, there is active hostility toward teen mothers. Consensus across US culture has been reached, with these groups leading the charge, that teen pregnancy is a social problem in the United States. In reaction, various media texts including television, magazines, newspapers, and films have created what Cohen calls “media panics” surrounding this controversial social issue (xvii). These media-orchestrated panics create increased visibility for “the ‘problem’ of teen pregnancy,” disproportionately visualizing its prevalence and thus making the issue seem larger than it actually is (Ouellette “It’s Not...” 235).

Additionally, this increased attention to teen pregnancy, focused mainly on middle class and Caucasian girls, erases the long-known truth that teen pregnancy is a “working class affair” that “is perceived as an urban problem” (Hudson and Ineichen 3, 9).

What is interesting about the volatility of moral panics specifically surrounding teen pregnancy is that they are cyclical. The most recent revival of this moral panic started around 2008. At this time, the United States was emerging from a period when, though the teen pregnancy rate had been consistently declining for twenty years, there had been a small spike between 2005 and 2007 (Sun). It is important to note that although this rate is decreasing, the United States still has the highest teen pregnancy rate among comparable countries (The National Campaign 2012, Whitehead and Ooms 1999).

Volatility ensued. Bristol Palin, daughter of Republican Vice-Presidential nominee Sarah Palin, received much attention as a teen mother on the 2008 election trail from both tabloid and more mainstream press. Around the same time, Jamie Lynn Spears, younger sister of pop-star Britney Spears, gained media attention for her pregnancy at age sixteen (Guglielmo vii). Before long, teen pregnancy became more than a news (or tabloid) story. An onslaught of television programming, both scripted and non-fictional, about the social problem of teen pregnancy filled the airwaves, including: MTV's *16 and Pregnant* (2009-), *Teen Mom* (2009-2012), *Teen Mom 2* (2011-), and *Teen Mom 3* (2013-); Logo TV's *The Baby Wait* (2012); ABC Family's *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-2013); and Lifetime's made-for-television movie *The Pregnancy Pact* (2010). *Juno* (2007) is also important to note within this context, but likely contributed to the most recent wave of moral panic about teen pregnancy rather than resulting from it.

In this thesis, my goal is not to point to a causal trigger for these programs' development and increased popularity over time, but rather to examine the context in which MTV's shows in particular have gained extensive exposure and cultural resonance. The actual U.S. teen pregnancy rate aside, the increase in discourses surrounding traditional family values and conservative rhetoric have fed, or perhaps brought to light yet again, the already-existing moral panic surrounding teen pregnancy.

#### **ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE – MTV'S TEEN MOTHERS AS POSTFEMINIST FAILURES**

Most of the examination in this thesis, especially in reference to the teen mothers featured by MTV, stems from the widely circulating cultural notion that teen mothers

embody a sense of “failed femininity” (McRobbie *The Aftermath* 85). My mode of analysis takes this notion of teen motherhood as a failure and pushes it further by situating it within the current socio-historical moment of postfeminism and neoliberal capitalism. Thus, my conception of what postfeminist failure (or success, in some cases) symbolizes is informed by these sensibilities. I argue that MTV mobilizes notions of postfeminist and neoliberal failure in its representations of the teen mothers featured in its programming. In order to clearly understand my analytic approach, I outline theories of postfeminism and neoliberal capitalism, paying particular attention to how closely interwoven these concepts have become.

Angela McRobbie explains theories of postfeminism at length in her 2009 book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Early in this book, she gives a succinct explanation of postfeminist thought: “Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’, these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism” (1). Postfeminist thought is the “new guise” McRobbie is referring to. While postfeminist thinking can be considered to take the place of feminist thought, I find that postfeminist discourse has a more complex relationship with feminism. Sarah Banet-Weiser explains that postfeminist discourse takes feminism for granted while concurrently renouncing it through McRobbie’s theorizations: “McRobbie calls this engagement of feminism by contemporary culture ‘feminism taken into

account' because it is a process in which feminist values and ideologies are initially considered, only then to be found dated and passé and thus repudiated" (*Authentic* 61).

According to Rosalind Gill, a postfeminist sensibility hinges on a strong sense of individualism. An ideal postfeminist subject is an individual who is the sole decisive agent in her life. Gill reflects: "Every aspect of life is refracted through the idea of personal choice and self-determination" (153). No matter the circumstances, the postfeminist subject assumes responsibility for her own life. This expectation is placed on the teen mothers featured in MTV's programming. Their pregnancies propel them into a life where they are making decisions that have real consequences, the first being the choice to engage in what was more often than not unprotected sexual intercourse. Gill's assertion that the postfeminist subject's life is "refracted" through such a mode of thinking is critical to unpacking this often contradictory idea. Rather than positioning postfeminist thinking as an entirely new framework, Gill posits that postfeminism functions as a new lens or vantage point from which feminine life can be understood.

While McRobbie and Gill (in particular) make nods to neoliberalism and its similarly individualized emphasis, I employ the work of Henry Giroux and David Harvey to further clarify the differences between the two theoretical frames. By incorporating theories of neoliberalism outlined by Giroux and Harvey, I am able to nuance my understanding of postfeminism and postfeminist failure. The addition of theories of neoliberalism to my analytical perspective highlights that individualism, for postfeminist and neoliberal subjects, places the burden of success (and thus failure as well) onto individual citizens. This personal responsibility frees the government and other social



institutions or communities from liability when these subjects face failure, and from the obligation that they must provide the individual with structures of support. Harvey explains that neoliberalism takes “political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental” (5). He offers a definition, clarifying foundational markers of this ideology: “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). For Giroux, neoliberal capitalism reflects a “collective life [that] is organized around the modalities of privatization, deregulation, and commercialization” (4). In its move away from anything shared or in support of systemic public welfare (social services are particularly relevant when considering teen pregnancy), neoliberalism not only moves the onus for economic success of citizens away from larger governmental systems, but also emphasizes what Giroux calls “a ruthless competitive individualism” (8). Similarly, Harvey explains that welfare systems create social and political constraints that work against the interests of neoliberal capitalism (11). Hence, social or more widespread problems (like poverty and welfare) are personalized and privatized through neoliberalism (Giroux 9).

Giroux makes specific note of how systems of neoliberal capitalism influence not only citizens holistically, but particularly youth, like teen mothers. Giroux argues that neoliberalism “has a crippling effect on youth, disabling any hopes not only for a better future, but also for a life that can rise above the hardships driven by the constant pressure

to simply survive” (7). This neoliberal prognosis for youth does not even take into account other hardships in these young people’s lives; most relevantly in this thesis, unplanned pregnancy as a teen.

Paralleling the language of choice utilized by McRobbie to describe postfeminism, Giroux explains that neoliberalism focuses on personal choices, especially in terms of consequences that arise from *failure* in both theoretical frameworks: “As a part of this larger project fashioned under the sovereignty of neoliberalism, human misery is largely defined as a function of personal choices and human misfortune is viewed as the basis for criminalizing social problems” (Giroux 8). Harvey uses the same language of failure when explaining the role of the individual in a neoliberal economic system:

While personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being ... Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings ... rather than being attributed to any systemic property (such as class exclusions usually attributed to capitalism). (65-66)

Both neoliberalism and postfeminist thought identify the individual as the source of any failure. The onus is on the individual to either stave off failure, or, if faced with it, to take personal responsibility for that failure. For teen mothers, this individualism involves supporting oneself over seeking systemically-based aid or welfare.

Through my engagement with theories of postfeminist and neoliberal failure, I hope to explain how MTV’s teen mothers’ are considered failures in *all* aspects of their lives, from pregnancy to finances, relationships, and more. These young women are condemned by the structures which inform their own lives and how MTV constructs their journeys. I am also particularly interested in who or what gets presented as a *success*

within the franchise's programming, especially given the circumstances that work to stack the deck against these teen mothers' achievements including poverty, lack of education, and lack of resources.

#### **WHAT HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT MTV'S FRANCHISE**

Surprisingly little has been written about MTV's teen pregnancy franchise until very recently. Only since 2013 has the franchise started to receive significant scholarly attention. The first volume dedicated entirely to MTV's teen pregnancy shows, *MTV and Teen Pregnancy: Critical Essays on 16 and Pregnant and Teen Mom*, was released in May 2013. Additionally, Laurie Ouellette wrote an essay on the franchise that was published in April 2014 entitled "'It's Not TV, It's Birth Control': Reality Television and the 'Problem' of Teen Pregnancy" as part of an edited collection on transatlantic reality television compiled by Brenda Weber. Aside from these sources, outlets like *Flow* and *Antenna: Responses to Media & Culture* have provided non-peer reviewed academic forums for discussions surrounding MTV's teen pregnancy franchise.

In this literature review, I move through each of the sources noted above in order to establish what issues have been discussed and what methodological and analytical approaches have been engaged in the existing literature on MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. Ouellette's piece focuses on how reality television programs about teen pregnancy can be understood as forms of birth control, and thus can be viewed as educational content. In addition to looking at MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, Ouellette also analyzes *The Baby Borrowers* (2008, NBC), a social experiment reality series where teens role-play teen parenthood, and *Dad Camp* (2010, VH1), a "'boot camp style'

therapy” show for the partners of pregnant teen women to learn how to be responsible fathers (“It’s Not...” 235). Ouellette’s methodological framing in her chapter follows how television can be understood as birth control “within gendered circuits of biopolitics and post-welfare governmentality” (“It’s Not...” 236). In relation to my project, Ouellette also engages theories of postfeminism and the “new sexual contract” for young women, in addition to analyzing teen mothers on these programs through Anita Harris’ discussions of “can-do” and “at-risk” girlhood, which I analyze below (“It’s Not...” 241, 243).

Guglielmo’s collection is organized into fifteen chapters on different topics related to MTV’s teen pregnancy shows. This book provides a useful foundation for my work because it covers a myriad of topics related to the franchise. Yet, this collection has a few shortcomings, including brief chapters that do not allow for rich critical analysis. As such, my project aims to provide more detail on topics such as *16 and Pregnant*’s framing as a diary and the patriarchal discourses engaged by Dr. Drew Pinsky in the franchise’s reunion shows than is undertaken in this edited collection. Additionally, the length of the publishing process has caused most of the collection’s chapters to contain out-of-date material. This outdated analysis can be viewed as problematic because the franchise is constantly evolving, changing, and adapting to the media landscape in which it exists. While I recognize that my own analysis will soon be out-of-date as well, I have done my best in this project to provide as much of an up-to-date analysis of MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise as I possibly could, making a concerted effort to include material from *Teen Mom 2*, Season 5 which just concluded airing in April 2014.

Many of the chapters in this collection engage the idea of MTV's programming being informed by pedagogical goals – to educate young girls about teen pregnancy. Caryn Murphy, for example, posits that MTV promotes these programs as “an educational effort” and that *16 and Pregnant* has an “explicitly educational mission” (3, 6). Margaret Tally similarly argues that MTV's strategy with these programs is to “use media to educate,” and she considers the programs in the realm of “health edutainment” (208, 210). These assertions already call into question how to label these shows – a tension that I explore in more detail in Chapter One. Despite the different positions being taken, Guglielmo and her co-author Kimberly Wallace Stewart make an important distinction between classification and intention: “Whether described as a documentary series, reality television, or edutainment, it is clear that the creators of *16 and Pregnant* and their partner organizations intend for the series to hold educational value and to be used in classrooms and learning environments as supplements to, or perhaps in place of, sex education programs” (22-23). Yet, the many genre-centric categorizations for *16 and Pregnant* noted by Guglielmo and Stewart call into question the entertainment side of what they call “edutainment.”

Many of the authors in the collection critique MTV's shows for their adherence to norms of reality television, namely the amount of drama and controversy that enters the storylines of MTV's crafted narratives. May Friedman, in particular, recognizes that “drama is key” in *16 and Pregnant*; I would extend her claim to the franchise as a whole (69). Along similar lines, co-authors Jennifer Beggs Weber and Enid Schatz posit that the main theme of the show(s) is the relationship between the parents (126). These

relationships are often volatile and provide fertile ground for dramatic confrontations and interactions. Laura Tropp pushes this idea further, arguing that the couples on the show are meant to be interesting to the viewers, and the more drama that they bring to the shows, the better the content will be received (167). Many of the authors directly engage the entertainment imperatives in these shows in relation to the educational premise of the content. Melanie Anne Stewart, for instance, argues that the entertainment component overshadows the educational: “In a sensational consumer culture preoccupied with the dramatic rather than the ordinary, MTV plays to an audience whose desire for controversy far outweighs any desire for sexual health education or visions of domestic bliss” (98-99). Stewart points to Amber Portwood and Jenelle Evans in particular, two of the more problematic mothers depicted within the franchise, claiming that the controversies surrounding them “thwart the educational premise” of the shows (103). Additionally, Stewart engages the celebrity discourse around MTV’s featured teen mothers, weighing how much this celebrity can be considered a by-product of participation in the shows versus teen mothers who are “actively pursuing further media attention for self-promotion to cement themselves as permanent celebrity figures within a sensational national culture” (106). This last question is especially compelling and one that I address in both Chapter Two and Chapter Three of this thesis.

Caryn Murphy’s chapter, “Teen Momism on MTV: Postfeminist Subjectivities in *16 and Pregnant*,” most notably intersects with my work, especially Chapter Two of this project. Her chapter shares much of my own theoretical framework, utilizing theories of postfeminism and neoliberalism as engaged by Rosalind Gill, and Anita Harris’ work on

“can-do” and “at-risk” girls. Murphy considers MTV’s programming to have some positive qualities, especially regarding the type of teen mother they focus upon: “By presenting teens who are smart, involved, and ambitious, these series may represent a significant intervention into widely held negative stereotypes that teen mothers are directionless, uneducated, and overly dependent on social welfare programs” (16). Yet, Murphy also recognizes the pitfalls of this focus: “The depictions of each subject as a capable, autonomous individual masks the realities of adolescence” (9). These realities include a dependence on parental financial support, unfinished education, and a lack of work for these girls. One key point at which Murphy’s and my work diverge is in Murphy’s assertion that *16 and Pregnant* follows a narrative similar to makeover shows – such as MTV’s *Made* (2003-2013) or TLC’s *What Not to Wear* (2003-2013). While Murphy sees the transition from being a teen girl to becoming a teen mom as one where teen lives are “[renovated] ... to accommodate (and excel at) the transition,” I would not take the claim that far (7, 5). The lives of the teen mothers who are profiled do indeed change, but more often than not that change is more destructive than productive (as I will discuss in Chapters Two and Three). Thus, makeover theory does not hold up in my analysis.

Unlike the edited collection, both Amanda Ann Klein’s *Flow* piece and Mary Beltrán’s thoughts published in *Antenna* provide an overview of common critiques of MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise. In her essay, “Welfare Queen Redux: *Teen Mom*, Class, and the Bad Mother,” Klein focuses her analysis on Amber Portwood, one of the

lower-class girls profiled on *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*, as well as one of the more controversial teen mothers featured:

Amber, a working class, Caucasian woman who beats her boyfriend and screams at her child, operates as the series' archetypal Bad Mother. The series' exploitative reunion special does acknowledge that Amber's history of domestic abuse and her inability to complete her high school degree has impacted her ability to effectively parent her child. However, within the diegesis of *Teen Mom*, Amber's status as Bad Mother is used to generate viewer outrage and drive home the series' message about the dire consequences of teen sex, particularly for the financially destitute.

Klein clearly outlines the problems that can arise from MTV's construction of the narratives around the featured teen mothers. The audience sees dramatic and inflammatory moments, like when Amber hits her boyfriend on camera, yet does not view the entire personal or emotional context for such outbursts. In doing so, Klein aptly argues: "Instead of investigating these important issues – how the cycle of abuse perpetuates more abuse – *Teen Mom* deploys the image of the Bad Mother as a straw man embodying the dangers of unprotected sex."

In her "5 Thoughts on *Teen Mom*," Beltrán similarly points to some of the problematic aspects of *Teen Mom*, and MTV's franchise more generally. Beltrán first asserts that "[*Teen Mom*] should be called *White Teen Mom*," explaining that although the program features multiple teen mothers, perhaps as an attempt by MTV for diversity, all the girls are "EuroAmerican." Beltrán then explains: "Teen pregnancy and parenting rates have been found to correlate with socioeconomic background, which translates to teen parenting being more often a reality for Latinas and African Americans than for white teens." She also clearly invokes the lack of socio-economic context within MTV's



content and problematizes MTV's desire to "present teen parenting in a neat package." While my analysis may not directly engage the points made by Klein and Beltrán, these views are important to contextualizing how this franchise has been critically received and engaged in the academic, and larger, community.

### **UNDERSTANDING GIRLHOOD AND FEMALE ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY**

In order to understand fully how MTV's franchise frames the featured teen mothers and plays upon wider discourses of teen pregnancy, safe sex, adolescent sexuality, and pregnancy prevention, I now look at theories of girlhood, adolescence, and female adolescent sexuality. In reviewing this literature, I set a foundation for how girlhood is understood in the United States (and the West more generally) and how MTV's franchise aligns itself or differentiates its messages from other understandings of what it means to be a teenage girl and a mother.

### **SOCIAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF TEEN MOTHERHOOD**

Teen mothers, as adolescents, are understood as existing in a problematic space between childhood and adulthood, as they defy most binary understandings of aged-based or generational identity. Sexual reproduction is conflated with adulthood, so the young age of teen mothers calls any clear age-based distinctions into question. Teen mothers, like adolescents more generally, exist in a liminal space somewhere between childhood and adulthood. Within the realm of sexuality, teen mothers cannot be understood as children because they are no longer sexually innocent.

In his explanation of childhood, Henry Jenkins claims that "childhood – a temporary state – becomes an emblem for our anxieties about the passing of time, the

deconstruction of historical formations, or conversely, a vehicle for our hopes for the future” (5). The teen mother “deconstructs historical formations” by reproducing and forming her own family prematurely. Anita Harris explains that “motherhood in the teen years ... is marked as inherently fraught, the cause of lifelong social problems and the end of opportunity. Even if planned ... it is always read as a mistake. It is often described as ‘children having children’ with the implication that young women, by nature of their years, are insufficiently mature to handle the responsibility of children” (*Future Girl* 30).

The confusion surrounding teen mothers parallels that in common theorizations of female adolescence and teenage girlhood. Harris explains: “For young women, adolescence continues to be represented as a difficult lifephase that will cause them trouble, specifically around their bodies, sexuality, and relationships. It is in overcoming these challenges, or managing these troubles that they become proper adult women” (“Everything...” 114). The difficulty of female adolescence is deemed worthwhile as long as the subject matures into normative adulthood. The failed embodiment of normative womanhood is where the teen mother is understood as deviant; she is neither a proper adult woman nor an innocent girl because she has not successfully managed her sexuality. Kristin Luker engages changing definitions of girlhood in light of the fact that girls are having sex before marriage, unlike in previous generations: “The prevalence of premarital sex means that a ‘nice girl’ is no longer defined as a young woman who has never had sex. Rather, it means a young women who has had sex but not too much of it, or who is sexually active but not promiscuous” (147). In the contemporary moment, managing adolescent female sexuality is much more complex than either engaging in or

not engaging in sexual activity. Girls' sexuality is carefully balanced on subjective notions of what does or does not constitute appropriate behavior. Harris delves deeper into the process that constitutes successful female adolescence: "Growing up 'right' has always been a highly managed process for girls in order for particular forms of gender relations to be maintained. Female adolescence has typically been represented as a risky business that must be carefully navigated, usually with the help of professionals, to ensure that girls make a successful transition to normative adult womanhood" (*Future Girl* 15). Harris' explanation of the management of female adolescence is notable in contrast to a perceived lack of management of male adolescence. According to feminist psychologists, adolescence for girls is burdened with more anxiety, especially around sexuality, than the same life phase is for boys. This gendered difference underscores an uneven social expectation that there is only one correct path from girlhood to womanhood. Teen mothers surely are not on this narrow path, and their deviance removes them from the possibility of being understood as normative women.

#### **"CAN-DO" VERSUS "AT-RISK" GIRLHOOD**

Harris devotes a chapter of *Future Girl* to an exploration of contemporary girlhood through two commonly circulated discourses about girls – "can-do" and "at-risk." Harris argues that popular discourses surrounding girls separate the successes from the failures, and makes a case for why teen mothers are understood as "at-risk": "Young women of quite specific populations have been used symbolically: particular kinds of young women have been constructed as a problem for society, namely young mothers, the sexually active, and Black and Indigenous girls" (15). While "can-do" girls are

successful in achieving normative adult femininity, “at-risk” girls are working with the odds against them. Harris continues: “The state of at-risk is depicted as a set of personal limitations that can be overcome through sufficient effort. However, it also acts as a warning to all young women that failure is an ever-lurking possibility that must be staved off through sustained application” (27). The notion that “at-risk” girls have the potential to overcome personal limitations is not always possible when the limitations cannot be controlled, like race and class. Ignoring these structural disadvantages leaves the potential upward mobility of “at-risk” girls undiscussed, as it is not considered a viable possibility, while the downward mobility of “can-do” girls is emphasized in this discourse. The “can-do” girl always embodies the possibility of becoming “at-risk” and thus a failure: “The potential for failure is central to the regulation of can-dos insofar as problems must be quickly dispensed with so that failure itself can be displaced and cast out onto other young women” (Harris *Future Girl* 34). This regulation of “can-do” girlhood plays into that of female adolescent sexuality more generally and the constraint of choices for the postfeminist subject. There is a very narrow pathway to successful “can-do” girlhood, which involves proper sexual expression and making good decisions, among other factors. Harris importantly postulates a potential protective measure of “can-do” life: “Academic success has become key to safeguarding the future” (27). It is through education, in this case, that “can-do” girls stay on track. Conversely, it is a lack of or shortened education that perhaps keeps teen mothers “at-risk.”

The perceptions of teen motherhood that emerge in Harris’ chapter shed light on how young motherhood is at odds with the “can-do” lifestyle. Harris explains that “can-

do” girls “perceive young motherhood as an unthinkable tragedy” (*Future Girl* 23). This tragedy is especially resonant for teen mothers who may have had a “can-do” life before their pregnancy. Harris defines the appropriate “can-do” attitude toward motherhood: “Motherhood is repackaged so that it is consistent with a glamour-worker subjectivity but also in ways that re-inscribe the maternal. Can-do girls are encouraged to delay child bearing until their careers are established but not to renounce motherhood altogether” (*Future Girl* 23). So, while motherhood is important to the “can-do” lifestyle, it must be integrated appropriately into the girls’ life. This “repackaging” of motherhood is key to “can-do” womanhood, where everything is determined in advance: “Children are important accessories to the successful can-do life, so long as they are planned to come along at the right time” (Harris *Future Girl* 25). It is the timing and situational circumstances of teen pregnancy that relegate the teen mother to an “at-risk” and arguably failed adult life.

#### **FEMALE ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY**

A common binary informing female adolescent sexuality is virgin/whore. Girls are compelled to exemplify sexual innocence, and their sexuality is managed much like their status as girls more generally. In her analysis of female adolescence in “Everything A Teenage Girl Should Know,” Harris asserts that adolescent girls must “be responsible for the effects of the sexual meaning of their bodies on others,” and “once they learn the sexual meaning of their bodies, they must take extra measures to maintain its neutrality” (116). Understanding and expressing girls’ sexuality is a tricky matter. Girls’ bodies are saturated with sexual meaning and signification that contribute to discourses that girls

need close supervision in order to manage the effects of their sexuality on those around them.

For example, looking at the 1960s' Beatlemania craze, Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs expand upon ideas of the *proper* expression of sexuality for adolescent females during the postwar era: none at all. Ehrenreich et al. explain: "In a highly sexualized society ... teen and preteen girls were expected to be not only 'good' and 'pure' but to be the enforcers of purity within their teen society – drawing the line for overeager boys" (11). Here, the double standard of expressions of adolescent sexuality is clearly defined, as the females not only should avoid publically expressing their sexuality, but also must actively participate in its repression. Meanwhile, boys are let off the hook, their sexuality is understood as natural and only controllable by a female. Ehrenreich et al. continue: "It went without saying that it was the girls' responsibility to apply the brakes as a relationship approached the slippery slope leading from kissing toward intercourse" (23-24).

The onus on the female to be an example of sexual propriety and to resist what may be her own natural impulse is still a very active discourse surrounding female adolescent sexuality today. This feminine onus likely exists because, as Ehrenreich et al. point out, "it [is] the girl who [has] the most to lose" – she is the one who might get pregnant or contract a sexually transmitted infection (STI) (24). Harris' analysis takes the notions of monitoring and self-surveillance further: "Mature female identity equals responsible heterosexual expression within an appropriate relationship. Part of this responsibility includes ensuring the health of herself and her partners" ("Everything..."

119). Again, the onus is on the girl. Teen mothers must be sexually responsible for themselves and their sexual partners while also working actively against their tarnished identities as young mothers. The past inability of these teen mothers to successfully navigate their sexual identity makes it ever more imperative for them to show society that they have learned this lesson if they ever desire to be understood as “can-do” girls.

When discussing contemporary girls’ magazines in Australia, Sue Jackson and Elizabeth Westrupp acknowledge similar expectations for female sexual expression: “While girls and women are positioned as heterosexually attractive and actively sexually desiring subjects ... they are simultaneously charged with managing and monitoring sexual safety, sexual reputation and emotionality in relationships” (369). More than being allowed to experience sexual *subjectivity*, sexual *objectivity* is outlined as an acceptable space within which adolescent girls can somewhat safely express their sexuality. The trope of sexual responsibility as being of paramount importance for girls is a pervasive and persistent one, overpowering any sexual subjectivity for girls, including discourses surrounding sexual pleasure (Tolman 2002).

In addition to being encouraged by adults to repress their sexuality, teen girls are socialized not to express their sexual desire. In her ethnographic work *Dilemmas of Desire*, Deborah Tolman interviewed girls on this taboo topic. She found a cultural “necessity for girls to cover their desire” (2). This sexual suppression stems from many of the discourses noted above, in addition to “the assumption that girls are the objects of boys’ sexual desire and have no desires of their own” (Tolman 5). Tolman notes that this gendered perception is partly caused by the manner in which heterosexuality is

understood “as an institution” that privileges males over females and male sexual desire and prowess over females sharing those same urges (17).

Tolman finds, through discussions with her interviewees, that as a culture “we tend to conflate adolescent sexuality with risky behavior” (9). She also observes that patriarchal understandings of female adolescent sexuality amplify the threat of pregnancy and other “ruinous consequences” for young women, while no negative consequences exist for young males (53, 111). The subjects she talked to are hard-pressed to move beyond what Tolman calls the master narrative that “sexuality is the road to ruination” (175). Within the frames of “risk and avoidance” that Tolman perceives continually in her fieldwork, she finds no room for a “pleasure narrative” in young girls’ lives (80). It is only through time, deep ethnographic work, and establishing trust with her informants that Tolman was able to create a safe space in which these girls, and she too, could explore the too-often unarticulated world of sexual pleasure in adolescent girls’ lives.

A familiarity with foundational literature on adolescent girlhood studies is important to understanding my argument about teen mothers who are constructed as somewhere between girlhood and womanhood. In particular, discourses that categorize girls, like Harris’ “can-do” and “at-risk,” shed light on very important distinctions that marginalize teen mothers and contribute to my conceptualization of MTV’s teen mothers being constructed, and then reproduced, as postfeminist failures. Additionally, a discussion of teen motherhood that does not engage discourses of adolescent female



sexuality would be severely limited, as these debates are the ones that most saliently problematize young motherhood.

### **ARE THESE SHOWS REALITY TELEVISION?**

MTV's teen pregnancy franchise is understood, generically, to be situated under the broad umbrella of reality television. This generic label, both imposed externally and partially implied when MTV marketed *16 and Pregnant* as a "docu-drama," informs the way the content in the programs I analyze is presented to its audience. An exploration of reality television as a complex genre will inform my analysis as the genre's conventions greatly affect how MTV's audience interprets the popular discourses that are engaged by MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, especially any educational readings of the programming. Additionally, this analysis will frame my argument in Chapter Two about the ways in which reality television constructs narratives from the everyday life of the subjects who are profiled.

Reality television, as a genre, is a broad classification that encompasses many different categories of content. A great deal of literature has been written about specific subsets of this genre, like makeover television (Weber 2009, Sender 2012, McRobbie 2009) and competition shows (Andrejevic 2004, Ouellette and Hay 2008). MTV's teen pregnancy shows exist in a different sub-category of reality television, what I will call in this thesis "socially-conscious reality television." The social consciousness I note as existing in MTV's teen pregnancy franchise is connected to the educational intentions of the programming. Drawing from the analyses in Guglielmo's edited collection that I discussed earlier, I see MTV's teen pregnancy franchise as educational programming

because of its goal to edify the at-home audience about pregnancy prevention and contraceptive options. This pedagogical address can also be viewed as constituting public service programming, as I discuss more in-depth in Chapter One, because it considers the at-home audience to be subjects who potentially benefit, and are improved, from seeing the hardships of teen pregnancy as they are characterized by MTV.

This socially aware sub-genre of reality television is the product of a combination of other television genres, including documentary television and docu-dramas (as *16 and Pregnant* was originally marketed<sup>7</sup>). Yet, Misha Kavka (2012) posits that reality television in general can be understood as “documentary ‘lite’ and associated with the decline of public service television” (3). Filling an emergent void in the larger televisual landscape, socially conscious programming like MTV’s *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* are arguably a new iteration of public service television, veiled as reality television, that are intended to edify their audiences, as stated above. I explore this idea more in Chapter One. MTV’s teen pregnancy programming works in a different way than other televisual content about deviant youth, including teen moms, because it is not a special episode or one-off program; rather, MTV’s teen pregnancy content has persisted for several seasons. Amy Kramer of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy reflects upon this difference: “*Teen Mom* is a game changer when it comes to teen pregnancy on television. It’s not like a ‘very special episode’ of something. Being able to see this stuff up-close and in this gritty way is really powerful. It’s not a happy ending, which is what real life is like” (Armstrong 55). As Kramer

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<sup>7</sup> As stated in this promotional trailer from before the series premiered in 2009, [here](#).

understands it, MTV's franchise shows reality. However, my thesis works to dispel that notion, instead arguing that what MTV's portrays is much more complex than functioning merely as either reality or artifice.

Rather than conducting a genre analysis, one of my aims in this thesis is to consider how MTV's teen pregnancy franchise can simultaneously be understood as commercially driven reality television and educational programming. I examine how MTV's shows can simultaneously advocate for birth control and safe sexual practices, while also exploiting the girls they feature and generating income from their failed teenage lives. MTV, in many ways, is able to write the "narratives" of the featured teen mothers. The authorial power that MTV has over its featured teen mothers' lives is enabled by generic conventions of reality television, like editing and casting, as well as by the network's brand image and marketing (Andrejevic 2004, Beggs Weber and Schatz 2013, Caldwell 2008).

Aptly, television scholars like Mark Andrejevic (2004) and Brenda Weber (2009) criticize the label of the genre, noting that *reality* is a bit of a "misnomer" and "oxymoron" considering the amount of editing and splicing of footage that happens behind the scenes before content airs on television (Andrejevic 16). Susan Murray, in her piece on documentary versus reality television, contends that the genre is full of "generically unstable programs" that are named as reality television in order to "activate the perceived values and implications" of generic labels (78). Heather Hendershot outlines some of these conventions: "Reality programs are constructed with a heavy editorial hand that strives to exaggerate conflicts, amp up personality, and to make banal

events entertaining” (245). I agree with Hendershot’s claim that reality television narratives are artificially assembled. It is well known that even the most factually sound content is constructed through the norms of editing and the positioning of cameras. The tensions that are pointed out by these scholars, between signifiers that point to reality television as a documentary format versus constructed narratives, inform and relate to the tension I discuss at length in Chapter One around this franchise of programming as both educational and entertaining.

The story arcs that MTV creates around its teen mothers are not natural occurrences as much as the achievements of the people who work behind-the-scenes on the shows. Kavka (2008) also recognizes the constructed nature of reality content: “Reality television shows are ... sites of constructed unmediation, where the technology involved in both production and post-production shapes a final product that comes across as unmediated, or real” (22). In other words, reality content is usually intended to appear as naturally occurring. However, that reality is a fiction. While the original material is footage that does reflect a more pure, though doctored, sense of reality, the reconstruction of such content through editing has the ability to tell a much different story than what appeared originally before the camera. These generic norms are not novel, yet they represent standards for reality programming that I feel are important to emphasize in light of my forthcoming analysis.

In terms of origins, reality television is often understood as a blending of other genres – Mark Andrejevic (2004) notes that reality television merges fiction, soap opera, and documentary (69). Richard Kilborn (2003) additionally poses that reality television

draws from soap opera and talk show genres. MTV's content can be considered what Kilborn explains as a "docusoap," a subgenre he defines as "combining certain structural and narrative features of soap-opera with elements of observational documentary" (57). Importantly, the documentary part of this equation is altered in docu-soaps, as Kilborn notes that reality television must adapt documentary style to the "market-oriented requirements" of televisual content (8). This statement is most explicitly referring to the profit motives that drive all commercial television ventures. Stella Bruzzi also engages the term "docusoap" in relation to observational documentary filmmaking:

The characteristics that have come to represent the docusoap subgenre of observational documentary are its emphasis on the entertainment as opposed to serious or instructive value of documentary, the importance of personalities who enjoy performing for the camera, soap-like fast editing, a prominent, guiding voice-over, a focus on everyday lives rather than underlying social issues. (76)

While Bruzzi is not talking specifically about reality television, her assertion that entertainment is valued over serious educational content is true in regard to MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. This quotation quite effectively encapsulates how I understand MTV's teen pregnancy franchise – the girls' lives are highlighted more than the issue of teen pregnancy as a collective and social problem. The cast features highly entertaining and instructive personalities that viewers can connect with (and perhaps learn from), and entertainment is privileged over education. Yet, MTV's teen mothers are still judged and scrutinized by this same audience as well.

Kilborn views reality television in general as a "lite entertainment vehicle," much as Kavka (2012) poses it as a lighter form of traditional documentary (89). While they may lack depth, Kilborn maintains that reality programs are made to produce an "aura of

real-life ordinariness” (13). Kilborn poses MTV’s *The Real World* (1992-) as an example of a “real life soap” and I believe the same label can be extended to MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise (93). Similarly, Andrejevic notes that the notion of “being real” is present in an early MTV reality program like *The Real World* (104). Nonetheless, as Bruzzi outlines, “the exemplary docusoap is structured and edited to maximise entertainment value” (85). Whether a “real life soap” or not, docu-soap leaning reality television content aims to entertain its audience above all else. Understanding MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise as docu-dramatic content engages in the complexity and messiness of generic understandings of reality television, and points to the slipperiness I outline in Chapter One when viewing MTV’s franchise as commercial television *and* educational content.

#### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

I conduct the analyses in this thesis explicitly from a feminist perspective, making it clearly a project informed by feminist critical media studies. I feel that this lens regarding my object of study allows for a gender-centric analysis of teen pregnancy, which is a social issue explicitly tied to gender. I argue that MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise exists within what Rosalind Gill calls a “postfeminist media culture.” I see the shows within MTV’s franchise as exemplars of such a media culture, adhering to the form and style of postfeminist media culture and therefore analyze the teen mothers in relation to how they conform to (or resist) representations of postfeminist subjectivity. I utilize feminist theories of postfeminism, outlined most clearly in the work of Gill and Angela McRobbie (explained above), to ground my own perspective. As noted earlier,

conceptions of neoliberal capitalism go hand in hand with theories of postfeminism, as the two are largely grounded in a privileging of individualism. This theme is upheld in MTV's framing of its featured teen mothers; the stories told are highly individualized personal narratives. Thus, in addition to Gill and McRobbie, as noted above, I engage Henry Giroux and David Harvey's theories of neoliberalism to further nuance my argument about teen mothers on MTV being constructed, and then continually reproduced, as postfeminist (and also neoliberal) failures.

Additionally, this project engages theories of girlhood, as outlined above. Social understandings of teen pregnancy press against understandings of girls versus women and children versus adults. These binaries are explained and explored further in Chapter Two. Through Anita Harris' work on girlhood, I am able to add age politics to the gendered phenomena I explore through this project's feminist perspective. Girls' studies, as a mode of analysis, complicates theorizations of feminism and postfeminism, which privilege a focus on the *adult* woman.

The lion's share of my work in this thesis is grounded in discourse analysis. I specifically engage the discourses that stem directly from MTV's teen pregnancy franchise broadly (namely how MTV markets their programming) and the three shows within it, *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*. Unlike some theories of media discourse that are grounded in Michel Foucault's theories of governmentality (Ouellette and Hay 2008), I have chosen to ground my discourse analysis in feminism and poststructuralist theory, outlined by Chris Weedon in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. This approach does not abandon Foucault, but rather amplifies

the contradictions that abound in the discourses I analyze (most notably postfeminism) and in my objects of study: “Poststructuralist feminist theory suggests that experience has no inherent essential meaning. It may be given meaning in language through a range of discursive systems of meaning, which are often contradictory and constitute conflicting versions of social reality, which in turn serve conflicting interests” (Weedon 34).

I have intentionally not included reception or audience studies as a component in this project. While I nod to it, particularly in Chapter Three, a reception study of this programming could be a whole thesis in and of itself. Additionally, time is a constraint on doing reception work, as is the fact that because these shows are still on the air and the featured teen mothers are subject to the same scrutiny and surveillance as other celebrities, opinions about them, as both individuals and teen mothers, are consistently changing. To supplement this shortcoming, I look at institutional tensions as presented via industrial, journalistic, and promotional discourse in Chapter One to examine how this franchise’s positioning on MTV, a commercial network, influences the larger perceptions of its educational address. I particularly engage this approach to tease out the tensions between understanding this franchise as entertaining, light, reality television content and educational programming meant to prevent future teen pregnancies from occurring.

## **CHAPTER BREAKDOWN**

My first chapter explores MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise through industrial and journalistic discourse, looking specifically at the franchise’s educational and commercial objectives. I examine these conflicting motivations by tracing MTV’s ownership by



media conglomerate Viacom and by probing MTV's partnerships with The Kaiser Family Foundation, through the "It's Your (Sex) Life Campaign," and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Both non-profit organizations have specific investments in MTV's programming, especially regarding the messages communicated via the programs and their perceived educational value. Yet, MTV is a commercial television network that first and foremost is concerned with the profitability of its programming, so I also look at how the franchise connects to the ownership structure of MTV by Viacom and to Viacom's other public service programming partnerships. While considering the relative successes or, more often, failures of MTV's featured teen mothers to embody an ideal postfeminist subjectivity, I look closely at these stakeholders and their motivations regarding teen pregnancy to gain a better understanding of whom MTV's teen pregnancy franchise is created to serve, whom they are in the public service of, and what social agenda they are ultimately advocating. Additionally, since MTV's programming exists within the genre of reality television, I interrogate how educational the franchise's programming is perceived as being versus how much of the content is produced with entertainment and exploitative motivations.

The second chapter of this project takes a more micro-level approach, turning to the narratives of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*. Through examining conceptions of girlhood and teen motherhood on these shows and evaluating the discourses surrounded these subjectivities, I demonstrate how the formulaic narrative of *16 and Pregnant* and the less structured approach on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* reflect postfeminist media culture. I also examine how MTV constructs the teen mothers they

feature as either adhering to or defying notions of idealized postfeminist and neoliberal subjectivity. I contend, through my analysis, that MTV exploits the continuous failures of its featured teen mothers. What I see as the manipulation of the teen mothers featured by MTV reflects the larger cultural understanding of reality television as exploitative of its participants.

Chapter Three builds on a foundation established in Chapter Two, moving from MTV's programs as objects of analysis to extra-textual material, specifically the reunion shows, which circulates outside of the hour-long episodes crafted by MTV's producers and editors. Here, I use Jonathan Gray's theory of paratextuality to look at extra-textual material both sponsored by and outside of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. The range of material that can be considered paratexts of MTV's programs is vast. Thus, I narrow the majority of my analysis – both discursive and narrative – to MTV-sponsored paratexts. These include after-shows, trailers, reunion shows, and exclusive “unseen moments” specials. I conduct an extensive case study of the reunion shows hosted by Dr. Drew Pinsky, and use this specific example to argue that the paratexts of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise work to repeatedly reproduce the failure of the featured teen mothers established in the original content. In doing so, I also consider how paratextual material contributes to the ways this franchise is understood in terms of genre. Additionally, because the featured teen mothers (especially those on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*) are followed in such detail and at such length by MTV, this chapter also considers the celebrity these girls have attained and how that informs the manner in which the girls are constructed by MTV and understood within the franchise's paratexts.

Finally, my conclusion looks at an issue that is notably absent from scholarship on MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, abortion. Through analyses of abortion storylines (of which there are very few) and a special episode affiliated with the franchise, *No Easy Decision*, I explore why MTV focuses on girls who choose to keep their children or put them up for adoption, rather than those who terminate their pregnancies. I also look at the continual growth of MTV's franchise (as it is still airing new content), my contributions to the small body of work on this franchise thus far, pose directions for future research on MTV's teen pregnancy programming, and address the research limitations of my own project.

## CHAPTER ONE – TOWARD UNDERSTANDING MTV’S TEEN PREGNANCY FRANCHISE AS EDUCATIONAL REALITY TELEVISION

In a March 2014 opinion column, *New York Times* writer Nicholas Kristof asserts that there is a solution to the problem of teenage pregnancy:

We’ve tried virginity pledges, condoms and sex education. And, finally, we have a winner, a tool that has been remarkably effective in cutting teenage birthrates. It’s ‘16 and Pregnant,’ a reality show on MTV that has been a huge hit, spawning spinoffs like the ‘Teen Mom’ franchise. These shows remind youthful viewers that babies cry and vomit, scream in the middle of the night and poop with abandon.

In his sweeping declaration, predicated upon an economic report that I will discuss later in this chapter, Kristof lauds MTV for what he perceives as its large role in the overall decline of the teenage birthrate in the United States. In the statement above, Kristof notes the educational value of *16 and Pregnant* for its audience. Yet, MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise consists of reality television series that are intended to entertain its audience and garner profit for the network. These two goals, educational address and commercial viability, exist in tension with each other as they relate to MTV’s teen pregnancy programming, are engaged by MTV, and understood in popular discourse. Despite what Kristof implies in the quotation above, there is no magic bullet remedy for the social problem of teen pregnancy. Thus, MTV’s franchise must be viewed more for its educational *potential* and its commitment to circulate information about teen pregnancy and pregnancy prevention than for being the end-all solution to high teen pregnancy rates in the United States. MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise illustrates how “can-do” girls can remain as such, accomplished in part by not getting pregnant as teenagers. Additionally, MTV’s programs, through modeling behavior that girls in the imagined audience should

not follow, open dialogues about issues surrounding teen pregnancy like adoption and effective use of contraceptives. Through these means of addressing its audience, MTV creates a public service ethos around its teen pregnancy franchise. This public service is enacted through educating the MTV audience (and citizens more generally) about the realities of teen pregnancy and providing information about how to avoid becoming a teen parent.

The educational and public service intentions of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise must be viewed in relation to larger understandings of reality television, the genre in which the franchise exists. Brenda Weber explains: "Reality TV holds multiple imperatives: it must earn ratings, it must entertain, and it must be cost-efficient and revenue-positive" ("Introduction" 7). Nowhere in Weber's description does she state that reality television must educate its audience. Conversely, she acknowledges common discourses about the genre of reality television, including its popular understanding as "a vast cultural wasteland" and a "'mindless' – or, at least, lowbrow" form of entertainment ("Introduction" 1, 3). Discourses surrounding the low cultural value of reality television undercut instances where reality programming can be considered to be progressive, as I see in the public service commitment of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. MTV's educational address is a key distinguishing factor that separates its teen pregnancy franchise from other reality content. The discourses surrounding the pedagogical aim of MTV's series serve as the foundation for my analysis in this chapter. In the following pages, I explore how the arguments that MTV's franchise is educational programming

can productively co-exist with the other imperatives of reality television outlined above by Weber.

MTV's teen pregnancy franchise is highly complicated, combining what is intended to be pedagogically informed content with dramatically entertaining reality television. These dual functions are fueled in part by the programs' complicated institutional support structure that combines a commercial, for-profit entertainment conglomerate (Viacom subsidiary MTV) with non-profit partners who also have clear agendas for MTV's programming and the types of messages that are communicated to the cable network's audience. For context, in addition to MTV, Viacom also owns TV networks including BET, CMT, Comedy Central, LogoTV, Nickelodeon, Spike, TVLand, and VH1 and film studio Paramount Pictures. The conglomerate was established as a company in 1971 and acquired MTV between 1985 and 1986. It is in part through MTV's partnerships with The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy that the entertainment and educational aspects of MTV's franchise are negotiated. In my analysis, I push to understand MTV's teen pregnancy franchise in a manner that acknowledges, and attempts to balance, its seemingly opposed modes of address. I ask, how can we think through common assumptions of entertainment and educational motivations for televisual content through MTV's teen pregnancy franchise in order to complicate understanding these goals as separate objectives? I find this approach useful because it avoids the common trap of viewing MTV's franchise as *either* educational *or* exploitatively

entertaining content, when it has become clear that the franchise engages both of these goals concurrently and in a productive manner.

My approach engages multiple levels of discourse, including those about the franchise, the genre of reality television, and American culture more generally. Attempting to balance these goals points to places where these competing objectives exist in tension with each other. The most salient tension I observe stemming from these historically conflicting intentions, and the one I focus on most in this chapter, is the one that forces an understanding that this franchise is educational programming against acknowledging it as extremely profitable for MTV (Ouellette and Hay 34, Havens and Lotz 136, Hesmondhalgh 5). This chapter focuses on how these contradictory discourses co-exist within MTV's franchise and considers how they might even be seen as representative of broader contemporary struggles between public service and for-profit institutional structures. In this chapter, I ask how are these dual objectives – of ending teen pregnancy and sustaining a successful and profitable franchise of programming – mitigated by MTV? Further, I explore how MTV's partnerships with The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy work to legitimate this commercially based franchise.

This chapter looks at MTV's "strategic partnerships" with The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy in an effort to understand how non-profit – for-profit alliances bolster the notion of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise as a public service that provides educational content for its audience (Ouellette and Hay 66). In this analysis, I also look at the franchise's placement

within MTV's, and its owner Viacom's, larger educational initiatives. Such a move establishes a pattern of public service and educational content engaged by Viacom, that through its positioning above MTV likely influences the teen pregnancy programming.

Perhaps what most sets MTV's teen pregnancy franchise apart from other reality television content, such as makeover and competition shows, is its relationship with these two extremely well-known public service and public education non-profit organizations. While much of the content that these organizations sponsor in the realm of *entertainment education* are story arcs in fictional and/or dramatic content (instead of stand-alone content), MTV and these non-profits share the goal of seeking to reduce the teen pregnancy rate in the United States. They partner to achieve this objective through producing content that pushes the imagined audience to change their own actions and modify their social behavior as related to teen pregnancy and adolescent sexuality. This content is present across MTV's teen pregnancy programs, guiding the viewer from commercial breaks back into the network's content, and in online spaces on information-rich websites hosted by each non-profit. This convergent strategy works to address the young, largely female audience for MTV's teen pregnancy franchise's programming in a non-linear fashion and on multiple platforms, potentially increasing the likelihood that the audience will engage with the educational content MTV and its partners are providing for them.

I frame my argument in this chapter through industry studies literature, reviewed below. I use scholarly work associated with industry studies to critically engage industrial discourses circulated about and by the producers of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise.



Through this discourse-centered framework, I look to understand how MTV sustains its dual objectives of educating its audience while also entertaining them within the context of the commercial television landscape. This groundwork will help me establish the argument I make in Chapter Two and continue in Chapter Three that MTV constructs, and then reproduces, the girls they feature within this franchise as postfeminist failures. Because they appear within this commercial and educational television content, these girls become entities from which MTV gains profit. So while these girls are framed as educational examples of “what not to become” for MTV’s audience, they also become objects of MTV’s profitable machine. This exploitation of these girls’ personal stories and journeys as young mothers has persisted over the years, in numerous seasons of content, and extending to extra-textual material, because it still turns a profit for MTV.

## **REVIEW OF INDUSTRY STUDIES LITERATURE**

Before I delve into an analysis of MTV’s expressed educational objectives for this franchise of programming versus understanding it as entertaining (and exploitative) reality television, I want to first highlight some important industrial literature to give more insight into my own, much more discursive, mode of analysis and frame of reference in this chapter and across this thesis. I find that looking at the industrial components of reality television uncovers some important aspects of its production and content that are specific to the genre. Additionally, I look to other, broader, resources and previously conducted industrial analyses in order to ground my scholarship within a context that moves beyond an examination of reality programming. In doing so, I aim to expand the discourses and dialogues I engage, specifically regarding educational and

public service television, that are not typically discussed in scholarly literature focused on reality television.

A lot of industrial-focused scholarship on reality television privileges discussions of the genre's production values, creative practices, and lower labor costs. Many of these analyses lean toward political economic frameworks, focusing on the attractive economics of reality television. For example, Ted Magder explains that when reality television first became popular, it created an entirely new business model for television programming (144). Using *Survivor* (2000-, CBS) as his object of analysis, Magder makes the important point that unlike traditional television content where actors must be paid, reality television features on-screen talent who are "dirt-cheap" (144). Especially in competition shows like *Survivor*, the talent consists of ordinary people instead of actors who require greater payment as compensation for doing their job. Chad Raphael points out that this type of casting practice makes it very easy, and normative, for reality television to "bypass union labor," as the new talent are not unionized actors trying to make a living (127). Reality television goes further than utilizing inexpensive talent though; as Alison Hearn outlines, reality television becomes about "marketing people" (168). Hearn's analysis focuses on competition shows like *America's Next Top Model* (2003-, The CW) and *American Idol* (2002-, FOX), yet this idea is not exclusive to those shows. She contends that "contestants can become saleable image commodities – or branded selves," and this notion is true of MTV's franchise as well (168). The cast of MTV's teen pregnancy shows have become known as MTV's teen mothers. They are understood as commodities of MTV and its teen pregnancy franchise (Mayer 108).

In addition to being cheap to produce, reality television depends on spectacles that enhance the entertainment value of the programming. MTV particularly, because it is a cable channel and not broadcast television, is not held to the same standard of featuring a specific amount of educational content or serving other public service obligations forced by broadcasters. David Croteau and William Hoynes explain that “cable channels like MTV, BET, and Comedy Central can push the line of industry decency standards and simultaneously appeal to a lucrative teen (and often male) audience because they are not particularly concerned about offending other viewers. Instead, their stock in trade is generating corporate profits by selling teens rebellious ‘edgy’ programming” (124) MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise can be seen as fitting into this definition of “edgy” programming because it revolves around discourses of teen sex and adolescent sexuality. Yet, the franchise deviates from Croteau and Hoynes’ claim because the programming appeals primarily to MTV’s young *female* audience. Due to the presence of discussions of sex and sexuality, as well as drug use and domestic violence (discussed in subsequent chapters), what is shown within MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise becomes an issue of ethics – MTV, and its partners, must consider how far they want to push “industry decency standards” to create the spectacle that MTV profits from while also retaining the shows’ educational value. Profitability is always a strong factor in MTV’s decision-making regarding what the network elects to depict in its teen pregnancy franchise, though MTV must gauge this motive with those of its partners for this programming. Croteau and Hoynes also bring up the notion of the profitability of the spectacle: “Sex, violence, spectacle: these sorts of programs are the logical end products of the corporate

pursuit of profits. They are relatively cheap to produce and, like an accident on the highway, they predictably draw a regular audience” (157). While these scholars are not speaking specifically about reality television when they make this assertion, this claim resonates when considering MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise. The shows involve (discussions of) sex and spectacle, as the girls MTV chooses to feature are exploited for the failures their lives, as teen mothers, represent.

Returning to the economics of reality television, Magder traces an important point of origin for reality television content. Specifically, the genre was part of corporations’ “general effort to reduce production costs and financial risk” (149). Reality television, as Magder explains, has become an “effective business strategy in a time of turbulence: reality programming attracts young viewers, lowers production costs, and offers opportunities for audience engagement across a variety of platforms” (157). MTV benefits from reality television content, like its teen pregnancy franchise, partially because the network’s audience already skews younger, the shows are inexpensive to produce and highly viewed, and the franchise engages with its viewers through digital media as well as through televisual content. In her work on *General Hospital* (1963-, ABC), Elana Levine notes that large-scale production constraints, like ownership structure and the status of the genre of programming, are largely economic in nature (68). While Levine is making this claim about soap operas, her assertion can be extended to reality television as well. Reality television’s success hinges on how it eases economic tensions through its specific business model, which relies on extremely low production costs to generate maximum profit. Chad Raphael also importantly differentiates reality

content not only for its low production costs, but also for the speed through which networks can create and disseminate content (130). This is evidenced in the proliferation of MTV's teen pregnancy programming, as *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* have aired four complete seasons of content each over the course of roughly five years<sup>8</sup> and *Teen Mom 2* has aired five.

Industry studies is a relatively new field of scholarship, though industrial analysis has been used in media studies research long before this area of study was differentiated. Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic make an important contribution to this body of research in "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach." As I have noted above, much of the research on reality television rests on political economic frameworks. In their article, Havens, Lotz, and Tinic point to cultural studies of industry as marking a shift away from these approaches to ones that place greater emphasis on more "microlevel industrial practices" that "emphasize the complex interplay between economic and cultural forces" (235). They urge "industry research on particular organizations, agents, and practices *within* what have become vast media conglomerates operating at a global level," rather than looking at ownership structures, regulation, and the connection to capitalist interests (236). My discursive analysis in this chapter, focusing on institutional relationships and discourses surrounding MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, leans more toward the model Havens, Lotz, and Tinic promote. A traditional political economic approach to MTV's teen pregnancy franchise might more extensively examine the implications of this franchise being produced by MTV, which is in turn

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<sup>8</sup> As mentioned earlier, *16 and Pregnant* began airing its fifth season on April 14, 2014.

owned by Viacom, a large media conglomerate. It might consider how such shallow and cheap series, as MTV's teen pregnancy franchise can be considered to be, fail to contribute to substantive social issues and cultivate meaningful public discourse. Viacom, like many other conglomerates, has adopted a business strategy "geared to *reducing risk*" (Croteau and Hoynes 71, 110). While an awareness of these industrial relations are useful to my exploration in this chapter, I find it more productive to focus my analysis how the educational goals of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise are informed by Viacom's broader stance regarding public service and educational programming.

Havens, Lotz, and Tonic encourage more macro-level research approaches to accompany the more micro-level studies, noting: "Key features of the critical media industry studies framework include a 'helicopter' level view of industry operations, a focus on agency within industry operations, a Gramscian theory of power that does not lead to complete domination, and a view of society and culture grounded in structuration and articulation" (246). Power structures and other dominating logics, like profit motives, cannot be forgotten when looking at commercial television content like MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. Yet Havens, Lotz, and Tonic also support thinking about the complexity of relations between structures and individual players – whether these players are networks, executives, or creative labor. In examining this programming's educational intentions in accordance with the approach outlined by Havens, Lotz, and Tonic, I remain mindful of MTV's stance on the social issue of teen pregnancy, the network's status within a large media conglomerate, and its other corporate and non-profit partnerships that influence the franchise. This industrial framework strengthens and contextualizes my

subsequent analysis of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, enabling me to view it in a more nuanced manner at both the macro- and micro-level.

#### **UNDERSTANDING VIACOM'S PUBLIC SERVICE STANCE AND MTV'S POSITION WITHIN IT**

Viacom, the company that owns MTV, trumpets its dedication to corporate responsibility and community relations on its corporate website. This commitment is extensive, rendering MTV's partnerships with The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy as part of a wider set of partnerships cultivated by Viacom-owned entities. Across its divisions, Viacom has established a practice of partnering with established non-profit organizations. Through this tactic, Viacom aims to achieve what it calls on its corporate responsibility website "REI" (reach, engagement, and impact) alongside ROI (return on investment). As Viacom makes explicit in its promotional materials, community engagement goes hand-in-hand with profit motivations.

According to [www.viacommunity.com](http://www.viacommunity.com), Viacom's dedicated corporate responsibility website, the conglomerate has been named to Bloomberg's Civic 50 list, which recognizes the most "community minded" companies. Additionally, the subheading to the name Viacommunity is "impact amplified," and the stated mission emphasizes making "a positive social impact on the people and areas where [Viacom employees] work and live." As Viacom's CEO Philippe Dauman attests in his CEO letter on [www.viacommunity.com](http://www.viacommunity.com), "social responsibility is a main cornerstone of [Viacom's] DNA and the hallmark of our employees."

In order to achieve its intended social impact, Viacom hosts over fifty community initiatives across the areas of education, citizenship, environment, and health and wellness. These initiatives are quite vast in scope, ranging from Paramount's rideshare program to VH1's "Save the Music" campaign to benefit instrumental music education in K-12 schools to Nickelodeon's "Worldwide Day of Play" that promotes active and healthy lifestyles for young children. MTV's partnerships, including The Kaiser Family Foundation's "It's Your (Sex) Life" and "Get Yourself Tested" campaigns are included in Viacom's overview of these initiatives and connected to its health and wellness efforts.

In Viacom's 2013 annual report (Form 10-K), MTV's teen pregnancy franchise is not separated from a discussion of MTV's other successful programs, including *Teen Mom* (2009-2012), *Catfish* (2012-), *Awkward.* (2011-), and *Teen Wolf* (2011-). Although Viacom touts itself as a socially aware conglomerate, I was surprised that *Teen Mom*'s mention as a "programming highlight" is the only mention of MTV's individual teen pregnancy shows or its franchise within this document. In this document's section on "social responsibility," MTV's initiatives are not named in the annotated list of the fifty initiatives Viacom is involved with. Through this positioning within this investor document, I infer that MTV's teen pregnancy franchise is not considered to be standout or novel in terms of attracting Viacom's potential investors. A similar conclusion can be drawn from Viacom's 2012 letter to its stakeholders, which names MTV's successful series (the same as those listed above) and contends that "MTV continues to connect with its audience [those 12-34] through pioneering reality television and strong scripted series." Even on MTV's own website, the teen pregnancy franchise is not highlighted and



separated from the rest of MTV's line-up. *16 and Pregnant*, Season Five, is featured on the top banner, alongside *Awkward.*, only because these programs have released brand new seasons of content in recent weeks. In light of the lack of attention in Viacom's and MTV's online spaces and investor materials to the teen pregnancy franchise I analyze, I find my study to be more complex than either Viacom or MTV promote to their investors or include in their brand images. Yet, a discourse analysis conducted using corporate industrial materials alone can only reveal a limited picture when assessing the cultural and institutional importance of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. Hence, additional perspectives need to be accounted for, including looking at MTV and Viacom's marketing and brand image. In this chapter, I look to journalistic discourses to nuance my understanding of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise as both commercial content and pedagogical programming, and how this relationship and tension can be productive.

#### **UNDERSTANDING MTV'S FRANCHISE AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL**

MTV's partnerships with The Kaiser Family Foundation's "It's Your (Sex) Life Campaign" (ISYL) and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy set this franchise apart from much other reality television content. These partnerships signal the conscious investment of this franchise in the fight against teen pregnancy. These partnerships existed between the non-profits (particularly The Kaiser Family Foundation) and MTV before this particular franchise of programming appeared, yet MTV's teen pregnancy programming engages these non-profits in new ways that are much more sustained and extensive than previous collaborations, as I will explain below.

Laurie Ouellette considers “*16 and Pregnant* as a ‘public education partnership’ with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy” because it and *Teen Mom* “promote a similar mission of deterring early childbearing” (“It’s Not...” 235). While Ouellette has examined the educational dimensions of MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise, my analysis differs from hers by looking at MTV’s partnerships with *both* The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Each non-profit is committed to the same goal, of ending teen pregnancy, but each act upon this goal in different ways. Based on my research on each organization and in examining each of their websites extensively, it seems as though these two organizations do not come together and unite forces with MTV, but instead maintain separate relationships with MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise. Even so, these organizations’ visible presence within this franchise indicates that MTV is invested, to some degree, in educating viewers through this specific franchise of entertainment media and thus rewriting what public service television has been imagined as previously.

Before I discuss each non-profit separately, I feel that it is important to contextualize MTV’s franchise within a larger framework of educational television programming. While MTV’s particular approach in its teen pregnancy franchise to educate its audience is unique, using television to edify audiences has been enacted previously both by MTV and other networks, through entertainment education and initiatives like MTV’s “Rock the Vote” campaign (Ouellette and Hay 221). MTV has been a network that has been subjected to the imperative to “keep changing” in order to remain fresh and relevant within the ever-expanding landscape of cable television

(Goodwin 132). In *Dancing in the Distraction Factory*, Andrew Goodwin notes that in its early days, “MTV had to *construct* an audience for music television. The key point here is that it was the television industry, rather than the record business, that led this development” (38). Similarly, it is the television industry, rather than the non-profit sector, that conceptualized and “discovered” an audience for teen pregnancy programming. Until MTV’s franchise (and the other televisual content launched around the same time cited in my Introduction), both The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy were committed to educating audiences about teen pregnancy through story arcs that were embedded in popular programs rather than existing as stand-alone content. According to The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s “Media Print Book,”<sup>9</sup> aside from the MTV franchise, the organization has had content partnerships with *Parenthood* (2010-, NBC) and *The Mindy Project* (2012-, FOX). Additionally, teen pregnancy storylines have been featured in scripted content, including *Awkward.* (2011-, MTV), *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011, NBC), *Camp* (2013, NBC), and *New Girl* (2011-, FOX). In her discussion of the educational value of MTV’s franchise, Margaret Tally specifically notes the teen pregnancy narrative in *Glee* (2009-, FOX) (207). This type of storyline embedding as a function of entertainment education has been used to address other social issues including sexual assault, substance abuse, and medical issues like HIV/AIDS and cancer. Yet, importantly, all the shows noted above are fictional; MTV’s

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<sup>9</sup> Available on their website. The 2012-13 season guide is available [here](#).

franchise is distinguished from other content by showing actual social actors, young women getting pregnant and choosing to keep their children.<sup>10</sup>

Educational programming has a long history of being featured on public service channels, such as PBS in the United States. While broadcast channels are required to have specific amounts of educational content per day, cable television is not held to the same standards because cable airwaves are not on the public spectrum. Sarah Banet-Weiser touches on these different standards when discussing children's television specifically: "Because cable television does not use publically owned airwaves, it is not subject to the same public interest obligations as broadcast television" ("Home Is..." 80).<sup>11</sup> Reality television shows, like those featured in MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, appear on MTV for many reasons. One of the many benefits of the franchise airing outside of the purview of explicitly educational and "public interest" content is that MTV avoids potential restrictions by regulators of the public airwaves and is afforded much more freedom regarding the content and context of their programming. Yet, as Richard Kilborn outlines in *Staging the Real*, the goals of public service channels include informing the audience, educating them, and entertaining them (3). So, even though MTV, through this particular programming, is not claiming to be acting as a public service channel, its teen pregnancy franchise is constructed to achieve these same three goals. Hence, while not doing so by name, MTV participates in the process of reimagining what public service television can be and realigning old definitions of

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<sup>10</sup> Many of the story arcs noted above center on pregnancy scares rather than actual pregnancies.

<sup>11</sup> In this vein, MTV, and its teen pregnancy franchise, can be considered to exist in what Amanda Lotz has called a "post-network era," marked by deregulation and more neoliberal inclinations.

“public service” to the contemporary, neoliberal, and deregulated post-network television landscape. MTV’s partnerships with pregnancy prevention oriented non-profits works to bolster the first two goals, informing the audience and educating them. Kilborn continues: “Producing a performance for the diversion or edification of an audience is, of course, deeply rooted in almost all forms of fictional dramatic entertainment, through whatever medium they are delivered” (13). What MTV proves, through its teen pregnancy franchise, is that these “performances” (as I do consider the teen mothers featured to be performing their lives for the cameras) are not constricted to fictional, dramatic content. MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise, through this line of analysis, can be considered to be reappropriating a medium (cable television) and utilizing a new subgenre of reality television (docu-dramatic reality television) for similar educational content. No other reality television franchise, to my knowledge, has successfully done what MTV has been able to accomplish through its teen pregnancy franchise of programming. Additionally, neither non-profit sustains comparable relationships with any other television network.

Television as a public service, or in the public interest, has been theorized by scholars such as Laurie Ouellette and James Hay as existing for the betterment or “uplift” of the audience. MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise does not fit into this categorization, as the shows provide the audience with what Ouellette describes as a “voyeuristic glimpse” of teen pregnancy (“It’s Not...” 249). Thus, while these shows can be considered to follow in the tradition of public service television in the United States, there are many ways in which the franchise deviates from established norms. Most notably, MTV aims to influence the audience of its teen pregnancy franchise by providing information and

further resources on online platforms, while public television has traditionally addressed its audience differently. Public television in the American context, as described by Ouellette, was initially designed to educate citizens to adhere to dominant cultural norms. The education that took place, therefore, was one-way or top-down in terms of power relations between the content producers and the audience. Ouellette explains that public television was imbued with a “promise of education” that was meant to “facilitate the people’s desire for ‘betterment’” (*Viewers* 68). This education, though the topics may have varied, did not enable a dialectic relationship between the educators and the educated; instead Ouellette explains: “Public television was *for* the people, not *by* the people” (*Viewers* 110).

This one-directional, top-down view of educational televisual content is addressed in some of Ouellette’s more contemporary work with James Hay in *Better Living Through Reality TV*. Using the framework of Foucauldian biopolitics, Ouellette and Hay explore how reality television, more than merely entertaining the audience, also provides a framework and/or resource for “inventing, managing, caring for, and protecting ourselves as citizens” (4). Considering this approach in relation to MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise, one can see how the programs serve to educate citizens (particularly teen girls) through showing the realities of what they should not become, teen mothers. MTV’s teen pregnancy programming can be viewed as “citizenship training” because it is showing a vulnerable population of teenage girls, the predominant audience for the franchise, a life path that they should not follow (Ouellette and Hay 15). In this sense, MTV’s franchise is what Ouellette and Hay consider “‘do-good’ programs” because reality television is used

as “a form of civic education and exercise” (32, 192). Of course, the oppositional rhetoric of MTV’s programming, through showing what *not* to be more than modeling good “can-do” behavior, may be lost on some portion of the audience for MTV’s teen pregnancy series. Even so, this perspective is important to consider in assessing how these programs educate their (imagined) audience.

Part of MTV franchise’s educational dimension stems from how the network frames, markets, and brands its teen pregnancy franchise. MTV has made a conscious effort to augment the teen pregnancy franchise’s aura of educational value. This amplification of the educational dimension of MTV’s teen pregnancy series is especially evident in the remarks that the franchise’s executives make about the content. For instance, producer Morgan Freeman has been quoted as stating that the teen pregnancy shows are a “powerful public service” (Tally 208). Series creator for *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*, Lauren Dolgen, echoes Freeman’s statement, as she argues that teen pregnancy is a “preventable epidemic,” implying that MTV’s shows are aiding in the prevention of teen pregnancy (Tally 211). These statements do not just come from those having direct involvement in creating the teen pregnancy franchise’s content. They also come from those at the network level. For example, as Stephen K. Friedman, President of MTV, notes: “[*16 and Pregnant* lowering the birthrate is] another reminder that great storytelling can be a powerful catalyst for change,’ ... the MTV shows worked because they focused on compelling stories, not on lecturing or wagging fingers” (Kristof). Yet, as I argue in this thesis, in many ways, MTV is lecturing its audience by pushing for pregnancy prevention and framing the featured girls’ lives as an example of

what a teenage girl should not become. In this vein, the educational objectives of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise can be considered to be much more problematic than its profit-oriented and entertainment motivations.

MTV's franchise may be understood as being hyperbolic in its educational address of its audience, especially as evidenced by the loaded statements of each executive cited above. MTV's partnerships with The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy legitimate this educational address, as I will explore below. Through these affiliations, MTV's desire to minimize the teen pregnancy rate through educational address gains credibility. In her work on MTV's franchise, Clare Daniel describes *16 and Pregnant* as "a product of a complex intersection of public, private, philanthropic, and profit-driven interests aimed at influencing its young audience" (81). It is these seemingly paradoxical understandings of *16 and Pregnant*, and the franchise more broadly, that compels my analysis. It is important to assess how MTV's franchise might be understood – and reconciled – in all these ways at the same time.

As noted above, the tension that most directly informs this chapter's analysis is between the franchise's educational intention and MTV's profit motive. This tension is important to observe and interrogate because it points to larger structural issues, like the fact that MTV must make money from its programming, that influence how the educational aspects of the franchise are engaged. In 2010, an NPR report observed: "While the MTV franchises in particular have proved to be moneymakers, the cable network and its nonprofit partners emphasize the educational nature of the programming,



claiming that reality entertainment can be an effective form of birth control when it allows TV viewers to ‘see up close’ and ‘practically feel how difficult the whole process is’” (“It’s Not...” 235-236). This emphasis on educational content has persisted over time, as it is the franchise’s grit and purportedly honest portrayal of young motherhood, stylistically and structurally, that reveal the true hardship of being a teen mother. For MTV’s programming, this characterization of the challenges of teen motherhood is where the educational address of the franchise ends; the rest of its pedagogy is externalized to websites sponsored by The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, which I discuss below. Additionally, the commercial success of MTV’s franchise is largely masked – for example, the girls featured on *Teen Mom*, *Teen Mom 2* and *Teen Mom 3* are generously compensated for their participation, yet the “reality” of their everyday lives as seen through the franchise’s shows does not reflect the girls’ greatly augmented income<sup>12</sup> (Stewart 104, Tally 214). One of the few indicators that the franchise remains profitable for MTV is that the shows are renewed season after season. The featured girls’ continual appearances in tabloid magazines and other popular press channels also speak to the programs’ commercial viability. Further, as discussed previously, *Teen Mom* is also cited in Viacom’s annual report as a “programming highlight.” Laurie Ouellette looks at this tension between profit and education as well: “Because the interventions [MTV’s franchise] operate within a

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<sup>12</sup> It is hard to find exact dollar amounts for this compensation, yet the amount that MTV compensates the teen mothers they feature is substantial. Participants like Amber from *Teen Mom* have noted that the monetary compensation was what kept her participating in the franchise in the recent special, *Being Amber*, that aired in February 2014.

commercially driven framework, their biopolitical objectives cannot be separated from the imperative to maximize profit by minimizing costs and capturing eyeballs. The tensions between doing good and turning a profit, between pedagogy and self-enterprise, are potentially messy and irresolvable” (“It’s Not...” 253). MTV must maintain a profitable line-up of programs in order to keep this franchise on its airwaves. In looking more closely at each non-profit that aligns itself with this franchise, I address some of what contributes to the high level of ambiguity over MTV’s goals and motivations as they inform this particular set of programs.

#### **THE KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION’S “IT’S (YOUR) SEX LIFE CAMPAIGN”**

According to “Reading the MTV Generation,” published by The Kaiser Family Foundation in November 2003, MTV and The Kaiser Family Foundation have had a partnership since 1997. The report states: “Since 1997, MTV: Music Television and The Kaiser Family Foundation have partnered on an Emmy Award-winning public education partnership to inform and empower young people about critical sexual health issues.”<sup>13</sup> The “It’s Your (Sex) Life Campaign” (IYSL) is one of the initiatives under this umbrella. The Kaiser Family Foundation’s work has been recognized with Emmy and Peabody Awards, and its assets include information guides, a hotline, and information-rich supplemental websites like [www.itsyoursexlife.org](http://www.itsyoursexlife.org). IYSL’s website, linked on MTV’s websites for each of its franchise’s shows, includes information about pregnancy prevention, but also has a targeted campaign for STI (sexually transmitted infections) testing. “GYT: Get Yourself Tested” is a partnership between The Kaiser Family

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<sup>13</sup> The full report can be accessed [here](#).

Foundation, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Planned Parenthood. MTV's teen pregnancy series provide three major media spaces through which IYSL can communicate its pregnancy prevention initiatives. A one-hour documentary entitled "I'm Positive" plays a similar role for GYT (though it is not as in-depth or effective, due to its limited length). In carefully analyzing both The Kaiser Family Foundation and IYSL websites, their main media assets are PSA spots; these play as bumpers between commercials and franchise content on MTV and direct viewers to visit the IYSL website to gain more information about taking control of their sex lives.<sup>14</sup> Laurie Ouellette, in her analysis of MTV's teen pregnancy programming, notes that the IYSL bumpers have increased in frequency as the seasons of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* have progressed ("It's Not..." 250).

Since IYSL's relationship with MTV's franchise primarily involves directing the MTV audience to their information-rich website, it is important to contextualize IYSL's contribution to the educational ethos of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise through convergent media strategies. As David Hesmondhalgh explains: "The Internet ... is not *replacing* television and other cultural forms; it is *supplementing* them, as often happens when new media technologies are introduced and disseminated" (350). The IYSL website is used as a place where MTV can direct its televisual audience to get information about how to prevent teen pregnancy. This outsourcing of data and information to a space connected to, but outside of MTV's franchise's programs, speaks to IYSL's educational

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<sup>14</sup> I was able to find PSAs dating back to 2001 on The Kaiser Family Foundation website, pre-dating *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, *Teen Mom 2*, and *Teen Mom 3*.

address in relation to MTV's and each organization's priorities regarding the prevention of teen pregnancy. While the focus within MTV's programs is about showing the imagined audience the hardships of teen motherhood, detailed information about pregnancy prevention and contraceptives are not included in the televisual component of the franchise. Thus, the IYSL website externally supplements the televisual programming by providing comprehensive information about pregnancy prevention strategies. The bumpers for IYSL that appear within MTV's teen pregnancy franchise's programming can thus be considered as providing a portal to the online world of information provided through the IYSL website. James Bennett describes this "portal" function, originally theorized by Lisa Parks, as follows: "Portals can be thought of as organized access points to a broad range of content" (281). Thus, MTV's contribution to this partnership is in allowing its programming to serve as the "portal" to the wide range of online information curated by IYSL.

The IYSL website is not the only contribution The Kaiser Family Foundation makes to MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. The non-profit takes a multi-pronged approach to its public education initiative with MTV, including targeted messaging, special programming, and the use of online and social media. The on-air bumpers I described above are an example of their targeted messaging. Some other ways in which education address is enacted by IYSL and The Kaiser Family Foundation include cast webisodes, cast PSAs, bonus scenes, and cast interviews. "I'm Positive" is an example of special programming. These one-off programs give audiences an in-depth look at sexual

and sexual health issues. Online and social media are most clearly utilized through the IYSL website, which links to both Facebook and Twitter.

The IYSL website specifically serves as an information hub for the campaigns’ pregnancy prevention, GYT, and dating abuse initiatives.

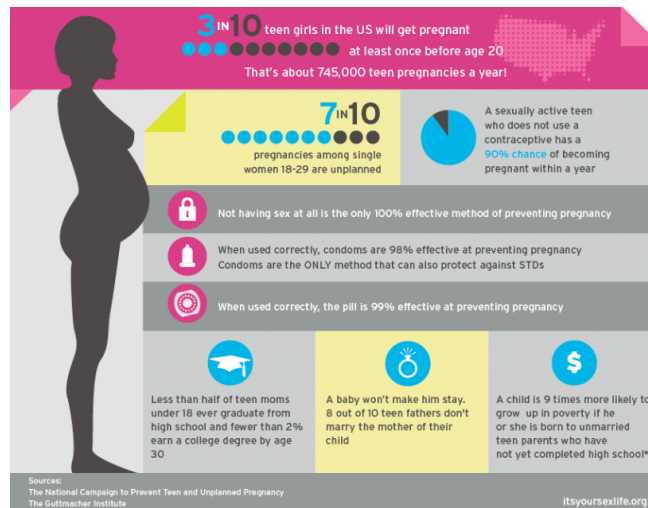


Illustration 2: “The Real Deal” in the Preventing Pregnancy section of IYSL, April 2014. Source/Copyright: [www.itsyoursexlife.org](http://www.itsyoursexlife.org).

Some of its features across the three initiatives include an infographic called “The Real Deal” (pictured above) which shares statistics about teen pregnancy and STIs<sup>15</sup> and an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) page. Within the pregnancy prevention section, IYSL shares “real stories,” which happen to be clips of MTV’s featured teen mothers. The site’s blog is also filled with stories about these same young women. IYSL, and The Kaiser Family Foundation more generally, prioritize providing information to those who seek it over asserting a political agenda regarding teen pregnancy. While neither the site

<sup>15</sup> These are the same statistics noted in Chapter Three.

nor MTV's programs explicitly discuss hot-button issues like abortion (discussed in this thesis' Conclusion) and abstinence, the website's consistent information about methods of birth control and waiting to have sex allude to these more controversial topics. IYSL does not expect that teens will be abstinent; instead, they advocate for teens to be informed about their options, and the risks they may encounter, if they choose to be sexually active. The website includes features about the dos and don'ts of condom use and provides an interactive feature which allows for comparisons between multiple forms of birth control. There are even links to set up reminders to take birth control and to help teens find a sexual health center by location.

Through its convergent and multimedia approach, IYSL adds another dimension to MTV's teen pregnancy franchise that moves it away from traditional, linear understandings of how televisual content is received by its audience. In his analysis of the BBC's commemorative programming about World War II, James Bennett outlines the "user flows" from televisual to online content, particularly for an elderly generation unfamiliar with digital technology (278). Bennett's analysis of the BBC can be extrapolated to MTV's franchise, as it too takes on a multi-platform approach that moves away from "the linear flow of broadcast television" and "the linear, broadcast text" itself (278). While MTV's investments in its teen pregnancy franchise engage televisual and online formats, IYSL (and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's websites) engages its digital media outlets to educate the franchise's audience. In Bennett's analysis, discourses of consumer choice and the British consumer-citizen became central, as "these discourses of choice and empowerment have also

infused the BBC's own rhetoric, positioning its use of new media technologies in terms of audience empowerment" (279). Similarly for MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, I see IYSL's engagement with new media technologies as framed as empowering the MTV audience. The imagined audience, when visiting the IYSL website, are "taking control of their sex lives" by getting information, just as the IYSL bumper's voice-over instructs them to do.

Together, MTV and IYSL aim to show teens what it is like to be a teen mother (and for males, a teen father). Drama tends to overpower MTV's narratives, yet even so, the partnership with IYSL ensures that MTV's specific subset of viewers who do want more information about pregnancy prevention, birth control, and more, and have a means of accessing the Internet to obtain that information, have a place to find these answers. Ouellette notes that The Kaiser Family Foundation also provides DVDs of MTV's shows to community and youth organizations. This service was adopted perhaps since the franchise's content may not be as readily accessible to the ethnic and lower income populations (in which teen pregnancy rates are higher) who may benefit from its information the most because the franchise airs on a subscription-based cable channel ("It's Not..." 251).

#### **THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN AND UNPLANNED PREGNANCY**

While both The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy have established partnerships with MTV, they do not have unified strategies regarding MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. The Kaiser Family

Foundation relies heavily on the IYSL website while The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy engages similar convergent media strategies through its sponsorship of [www.bedsider.org](http://www.bedsider.org) and [www.stayteen.org](http://www.stayteen.org). Both these websites are linked on MTV's shows' websites, like IYSL, and plugged in on-screen bumpers and by Dr. Drew in the franchise's reunion specials. Bedsider.org is a website dedicated to providing information about birth control. This effort includes explorations of various birth control methods, comparisons between them, and reminders to take them, much like IYSL. Stayteen.org is much more comparable to the IYSL website, as it has sections about waiting to engage in sexual intercourse, birth control options, STIs, dating abuse, and healthy relationships. It also provides resources for users to attain sexual health care. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is the #1 resource on preventing teen pregnancy according to consulting agency McKinsey.<sup>16</sup> The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's website provides national and state data on teen pregnancy, separated by age and ethnicity. Additionally, the campaign's general website provides resources and information on contraceptives and a database of effective sex education programs. Yet, unlike IYSL, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's websites are not as readily integrated into MTV's televisual content, making the "user flows" less coherent when accessing these particular resources. Even so, like IYSL, the educational content on The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's websites is externalized from MTV's televisual programming.

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<sup>16</sup> As noted on The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's website.



Founded in 1996 and endorsed by the Clinton administration, this non-profit “works within the private sector, including commercial media, to promote a mission of responsible behavior” (Ouellette “It’s Not...” 242). Its mission clearly outlines the organization’s goals and objectives:

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy seeks to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults.

MTV provides The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy access to the single, young adults they target by acting as a portal from the televisual to online information outlets. The content of MTV’s programming illustrates the hardships involved with parenting as a teen, which hopefully encourages viewers to wait to have children until they can provide for them adequately. Laurie Ouellette examines this partnership extensively, noting that The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has clear, self-described goals including “reducing out-of-wedlock births, improving overall family well-being, reducing taxpayers’ burdens, reducing the need for abortion, reducing family turmoil and relationship conflict, and helping women and men better plan their futures” (“It’s Not...” 243). Like The Kaiser Family Foundation and IYSL, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy can be considered as advocating for the dissemination of information. As Ouellette outlines, the non-profit “does not provide contraception or reproductive services” (“It’s Not...” 242). She continues: “While the National Campaign provides an alternative to abstinence-only

programs, it does not distribute resources or take sides on political struggles over reproductive issues” (“It’s Not...” 244). This non-partisan approach favors circulating information about how to prevent teen pregnancy over engaging in highly politicized and controversial discussions related to such topics as women’s reproductive rights and abortion.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is most engaged with MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise through creating and distributing study and discussion guides,<sup>17</sup> as well as DVDs, that are directly related to episodes of *16 and Pregnant* (Ouellette 2014, Stewart 2013). Clare Daniel describes this partnership as “using media as a ‘force of good,’” as these study guides open conversations about teen sexuality that have not occurred before, at least so openly (81). Teen pregnancy, as a social issue, is being *publically* discussed and addressed through MTV’s shows and the partnerships with both non-profit organizations. Margaret Tally notes this, citing The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s chief executive Sarah Brown’s claim that MTV’s shows are affecting the national conversation about teen pregnancy more than reducing the teen pregnancy rate just by being on the air (212).

#### **EITHER/OR UNDERSTANDINGS OF MTV’S TEEN PREGNANCY FRANCHISE**

As reflected in the quote that opened this chapter, I find that when MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise is discussed as educational content for its audience, these educational intentions more often than not become over simplified. MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise becomes programming that is *either* understood as educational *or* it

is dismissed as exploitative reality television. There does not seem to be much of a middle ground when this franchise is focused on in popular press, as Kristof only focuses on one side of the productive tension I explore in this chapter. Below I discuss another press discussion of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise that privileges seeing it as educational, and thus overlooks the tension and complexity between educational content and profit-oriented reality television that I trace in this chapter.

On Monday, January 13, 2014, a report conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research was released stating that there was a "5.7% reduction in teen birthrates in the 18 months following [*16 and Pregnant*'s] introduction" (Kearney and Levine 2). In this report, entitled "Media Influences on Social Outcomes: The Impact of *16 and Pregnant* on Teen Childbearing," Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip B. Levine outline how *16 and Pregnant*, and MTV's teen pregnancy franchise more broadly, contributed to the already declining teen birthrate in the United States. The authors' claims, especially the 5.7% decrease, support the notion that MTV's franchise should be considered to be educational content.

When this report was released, it was thoroughly discussed in the media. With a concrete statistical percentage to support the claim that MTV's teen pregnancy reality television shows have affected the overall decline in the US teen pregnancy rate, media outlets like *The New York Times* and *NPR* were quick to pick up and cover the story. Yet,

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<sup>17</sup> These discussion guides are accessible on The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's website.

upon reading the report, in addition to an array of articles about it, I call this statistical evidence into question. I see it, and this report more generally, as de-contextualizing MTV's teen pregnancy franchise's complex motivations fusing entertainment and education. This report makes MTV's franchise seem as though it is primarily educational and behavior altering. While this viewpoint may hold some truth, this report problematically uses data from an eighteen-month period between June 2009 (when *16 and Pregnant* first premiered) and December 2010 (Kearney and Levine 35). The data is over three years out of date, and does not account for changes in MTV's franchise, including the introduction of *Teen Mom*, *Teen Mom 2*, and *Teen Mom 3*, as well as additional seasons of *16 and Pregnant*. Furthermore, as Annie Lowrey of *The New York Times* points out, the study and its claims are based on the correlation of high viewership of MTV's programming and a reduction in teen birthrates. Put more simply, this study cannot account for individual behavioral shifts that contribute to a decline in teen birthrates because of exposure to *16 and Pregnant*, which makes the 5.7% reduction a claim that is perhaps not as unequivocally accurate as it first seems.

Yet, just because this study is one that rests on a correlation does not mean that its methodology is not rigorous or that the trend it traces should be dismissed altogether. Instead, the findings of this report should be critically interrogated in order to parse out what aspects contribute to a cultural understanding of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise as educational programming and how these findings can be situated within the franchise's entertainment and profit-oriented goals. Kearney and Levine do account for other factors that contributed to the decelerating teen birthrate in the United States. In an *NPR*

interview with Audie Cornish, Kearney explains that the 5.7% decrease attributed to *16 and Pregnant* represents a third of the overall decline – half is due to the recession and the remainder credited to an ongoing downward trend. In this same interview, Kearney outlines that, based on hers and Levine’s previous research, “targeted policies could not be the explanation” for such a rapid decline in teen birthrates. These policies include sex education and expanded abstinence-only programs. Hence, as she explains to Cornish, she and Levine used a multi-faceted approach to determine how much of an effect awareness of and exposure to *16 and Pregnant* had on the teen birthrate. This included establishing the birthrate, splitting it by media markets, and using Nielsen data to establish who was watching MTV and where they were located. Additionally, Kearney and Levine gathered historical data on Google searches and Twitter feeds. In the Google data, the pair specifically focused on searches about birth control around the times when *16 and Pregnant* aired (the day of or day after), finding “spikes” in the data that correlated with places where MTV was viewed in higher volumes (NPR Staff). In the Twitter data, Kearney and Levine found a trend of tweets along the lines of: “*16 and Pregnant* reminds me to take my birth control” and “*16 and Pregnant* is the best form of birth control” (NPR Staff).

Thus, while the 5.7% Kearney and Levine suggest may be questionable, what is not in question through a critical look at this research is that *16 and Pregnant* has made some teens more aware of teen pregnancy and methods of birth control than they would have been otherwise. This awareness has likely contributed to an already-declining teen birthrate in the United States and the findings in this report may produce more profit

(through higher viewership) for MTV. As I will explore later in this thesis, this awareness has been fostered in a very specific manner by MTV, playing on moral panics surrounding teen pregnancy and through exploiting the failures of the girls featured on the franchise's series. As Lowrey states, "the show – in part by educating teenagers about the difficulty of having a child, in part by stressing the consequences of unprotected sex and in part by fostering a conversation about contraceptives and pregnancy – seems to have reduced the rate of teenage births." Unlike Kearney and Levine, Lowrey does not attempt to quantify the reduction. She also focuses her commentary on specific outcomes from the content itself – conversations, awareness, and consequences. Yet, these outcomes are still the product of the specific modes of storytelling that MTV utilizes in this franchise of programming, which do not portray teen mothers in a favorable light.

At the end of her interview with Cornish, Kearney pulls back from a reliance on statistics and takes stock of the bigger picture she sees in regards to the positive outcomes of MTV's content and her research:

The biggest takeaway from this study is what teenagers are watching can make a really big difference in what they think, and ultimately how they behave and really important life decisions. Interestingly, usually we talk about the media as a negative effect on behavior – an increase in violence, and increase in sex – but this show suggests that context really matters, and the specific content of what's portrayed really matters. So in this case, the media images seem to be really having a positive social effect to the extent that we think that a reduction in teen births is a good thing. (NPR Staff)

The potential for media to have positive effects on teen behavior cannot be denied through the findings in Kearney and Levine's report. Yet, as Kearney notes above, context is of the utmost importance.

Like Kristof's claims that opened this chapter, this report privileges the educational success of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise above all else. In the process, this report fails to acknowledge the multiple imperatives that MTV, and its partner non-profits, employ through this franchise. MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, as I explore in this chapter and this thesis more broadly, is about more than reducing the teen pregnancy rate and this report's statistical proof of that success conceals many important, and more problematic, aspects of the franchise. Some viewers may be educated, but in being entertained as well, the audience for MTV's teen pregnancy content is presented with extremely specific visions of "the reality of teen pregnancy."

## **CONCLUSION**

MTV's franchise's ability to raise these questions – of profit versus education and of entertainment versus pedagogy – without any clear resolution make it particularly compelling as a site for analysis. Through the discourses I have examined in this chapter, I have been able to trace how MTV's educational address conforms to and diverges from more traditional understandings of pedagogical content. Particularly, I find the non-profit partnerships to be extremely useful in legitimating MTV's educational goals for this set of programs as the network attempts to reach out to its audience and start conversation amongst them about safe sex and sexual health. Yet, the franchise is hard to categorize holistically, as it is neither wholly educational content nor solely exploitative reality television – not withstanding the binaries presented in popular press and journalistic outlets. I find this hybridity, and the tension it creates, to be productive and complicate

simple claims that MTV's teen pregnancy franchise is effective birth control and has reduced the teen pregnancy rate in the United States.

My desire to expose the tension between educational and entertaining motives behind this franchise connects to my project's engagement with theories of postfeminism and understanding of the teen mothers MTV features as postfeminist failures. Theories of postfeminism, as outlined in my Introduction, help to explain both what makes MTV's teen pregnancy franchise educational and what makes it dramatically entertaining. The failure of the teen mother as a postfeminist and neoliberal subject entertains through its spectacle, yet educates the audience to uphold "can-do" girlhood as something to continually strive for. Seeing this spectacle potentially empowers MTV's audience of young teens to take control of their lives and their sexuality, and to do what they can to avoid becoming sixteen and pregnant.



## **CHAPTER TWO – SO YOU GOT PREGNANT AT SIXTEEN, NOW WHAT?: POSTFEMINIST FAILURE ON *16 AND PREGNANT, TEEN MOM, AND TEEN MOM 2***

In this chapter, I examine how MTV's teen pregnancy programming features and exploits the failures of the young mothers it follows on *16 and Pregnant* and within the two iterations of *Teen Mom* outlined in my Introduction. These failures extend beyond getting pregnant as a teen; through their involvement with MTV's franchise, the featured girls open their lives to MTV's cameras and continual surveillance. MTV first exploits these girls through revealing their lives on camera on *16 and Pregnant*, and has continued to encourage these girls to remain in the public eye through publicity in additional series (*Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*) and media outlets outside of the franchise's texts (which I will discuss in Chapter Three). With the constant observation of these girls by MTV comes public scrutiny over every decision (especially the bad ones) that these girls make, over extended periods of their lives. Mark Andrejevic, in his study of *Big Brother* (2000-, CBS), presents surveillance of this sort as a "mediated spectacle" (2). According to Andrejevic, reality television programs re-appropriate surveillance so that the emphasis is on those being watched over those who are watching (95). The "sustained, intimate access" afforded by documentary-style reality programming like MTV's teen pregnancy franchise creates a narrative space centered on exposing the shortcomings of the teen mothers (Kavka *Reality TV* 167).

My work in this chapter takes this notion of surveillance of the subjects featured on reality television and pushes it further, as I explore how MTV's teen pregnancy franchise makes a spectacle of the teen mothers featured within its programming by

exploiting their failures. May Friedman calls the teen mothers featured on *Teen Mom* “unfolding disasters” (67). This judgment encapsulates the notions of spectacle and postfeminist failure that I see across the franchise’s content – the girls’ failures build upon one another. While it is important to note that some of the storylines within MTV’s franchise are much more disastrous than others, all of the storylines uphold this idea of accrued failures.

In the following pages, I probe the notions of surveillance and the spectacle created around the lives of the young women MTV’s features in this franchise, honing in on how the teen mothers on these shows are presented as failing to adhere to norms of postfeminist womanhood. Like Letizia Guglielmo states in the Introduction of her edited collection, *MTV and Teen Pregnancy: Critical Essays on 16 and Pregnant and Teen Mom*, the “teachable moments” to be drawn from depictions of teen pregnancy on television and in popular press are overrun by the message: “don’t let this happen to you” (vii). It is in MTV’s representation of what a teenage girl should *not* be that the teen mothers featured in its programs begin to signify what I delineate as “postfeminist failure.” I ask, how does MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise produce, and also exploit, the featured teen mothers as postfeminist failures?

In order to explore this question, I conduct narrative, discourse, and formal analyses of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*. I approach *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* shows separately, as they visually, discursively, and narratively address teen pregnancy in these girls’ lives quite differently. Most obviously, each episode of *16 and Pregnant* features one teen mother’s journey while *Teen Mom* and

*Teen Mom 2* follow four teen mothers in each series, weaving the four discrete stories together in a somewhat fragmented manner with a longer narrative arc. While my analytic perspective focuses on understanding MTV's featured teen mothers as postfeminist failures and I will carry that theme through this chapter (and the next), I conduct narrative analyses of *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series because I see these narratives as denoting and exposing these failures and spectacles through sustained surveillance. The divergent storytelling formats utilized on these shows reveal the differing ways through which MTV is able to communicate these girls' persistent failures.

I look at four episodes of *16 and Pregnant* in this chapter, tracing the narrative structure that emerges as a cornerstone of the show's method of storytelling. The four episodes I analyze represent each season of *16 and Pregnant* that has aired in its entirety to date. I chose these four episodes somewhat randomly, believing that using one episode from each season would be representative of the nearly fifty teen mothers profiled on *16 and Pregnant*.<sup>18</sup> By choosing one episode from each season, I also hoped to trace changes in the show's content and discursive messages about teen pregnancy as the series became more established and popular as well as gained a broader viewer base. Since the narrative structure of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* differ so fundamentally from that of *16 and*

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<sup>18</sup> While all the girls analyzed in this paper are Caucasian (or in Farrah's case ethnically ambiguous with a Caucasian mother) and middle-class, this demographic homogeneity is not true for the entire cast of *16 and Pregnant*. Yet, even so, this racial and class-based skew in MTV's casting is a major criticism of the show because it differs quite extensively from the real demographics of teen pregnancy (largely working class and ethnic minorities).

*Pregnant*, my narrative analysis of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* takes on a tracking model. My analysis stems from following thematic trends that are indicative of what I see as postfeminist failure across the narratives and experiences of the eight teen mothers featured across the numerous seasons of the two series.

I begin the analysis in this chapter by clearly identifying what I interpret to be key signposts of postfeminism and my conception of postfeminist failure – individualism and the rhetoric of choice. While these particular discourses are not exhaustive of what constitutes postfeminist rhetoric, they are representative of the sensibility and are clearly applicable to the texts I engage in my analysis. It is through these signposts that I select examples to justify what I see as postfeminist failure. The repetition of these moments bolsters my claim that MTV produces such moments continually through its sustained surveillance of the girls featured on *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*.

## **INDIVIDUALISM**

As I explored in the Introduction, a postfeminist sensibility hinges on a strong sense of individualism, much like neoliberalism, according to Rosalind Gill. An ideal postfeminist subject, as imagined by Gill, is an individual who is the sole decisive agent in her life. Along with adhering to this highly individualized sense of personal agency, the postfeminist subject is imagined as existing within a distinctively individualized realm where singular people are held responsible for what happens to them. As I discussed in my explanation of neoliberalism in my Introduction, social institutions do not provide relief for these citizens within this ideological frame; power and control over one's life are individualized and turned inward toward the postfeminist subject instead of

being imagined as part of external social structures over which each postfeminist subject has little or no control. Angela McRobbie further expands upon these ideas: “Individuals must now choose the kind of life they want to live. Girls must have a lifeplan. They must become more reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives, from making the right decisions, to taking responsibility for their own working lives” (“Post-Feminism...” 261). With this individuality afforded to postfeminist subjects comes personal accountability regarding their futures. Clear goals and plans to attain them are necessary to ensure the “proper” lifepath for each postfeminist subject, and adherence to such objectives becomes a key gauge of future success. Any failure becomes a personal one caused by the girl herself, and any wrong decision leaves only the postfeminist subject to blame. Clare Daniel discusses the notion of plans and paths in relation to teen pregnancy, especially in White, middle-class populations, the oft-featured population on MTV: “Pregnancies are therefore presented as unsettling and burdensome in a way that affects all teenage girls with the same basic consequences – by ruining their lighthearted innocence and disrupting their life course” (83). Teen pregnancy is deviant from the path ascribed to the average teenage girl and it is through this nonconformity that the teen mother begins to be seen as a postfeminist failure.

MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise exists in and thus reflects the contemporary cultural moment that embraces the neoliberal and postfeminist ideal of individualism. Thus, the series within MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise construct postfeminism and neoliberalism much as they are understood on a broad cultural level, privileging the subject who embodies these foundational values. Yet, instead of featuring “can-do” girls

who exhibit the successful navigation of individualism in their adolescence, MTV's programs spotlight "can-do" girls who became "at-risk" girls because they got pregnant as teenagers and decided to keep their children. These two decisions are the initial ones that mark failed individualism for MTV's featured teen mothers, through a postfeminist understanding of the term, and are identified as the failures that launch the rest that inevitably follow.

### **THE RHETORIC OF CHOICE**

A postfeminist sense of individualism informs how notions of choice and decision-making are enacted for postfeminist subjects. McRobbie, in the previous quotation, discusses "making the right decisions," invoking what in theories of postfeminism is referred to as the "rhetoric of choice." This rhetoric not only centers on the idea that the postfeminist subject makes all the decisions in her life, but that she must make the *correct* decisions: "Choice is surely within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right decisions. By these means new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably" (McRobbie "Post-Feminism..." 261). McRobbie explains that the consequence of making wrong decisions is failure, determined by larger societal narratives and cultural norms that dictate what is conceived of as right versus wrong and indicative of success versus failure. Anita Harris describes discourses of girls as being understood as either "can-do" or "at-risk," as I discussed in the Introduction. Harris asserts that "can-do" girls remain as such because they make the correct decisions,

employing the rhetoric of choice. In terms of teen pregnancy prevention, these appropriate decisions include delaying marriage and motherhood, perhaps through utilizing birth control or by practicing abstinence, in order to ensure a successful life course.

The freedom of choice is, paradoxically, extremely limiting because only particular decisions are deemed reflective of a responsible postfeminist selfhood. As Anita Harris discusses in *Future Girl*, “Young women are imagined as having a range of good decisions before them, and therefore those who choose poorly have no one to blame but themselves” (30). The implicit assumption is that a bad decision is reflective of the person who made it rather than any larger structural constraints. Caryn Murphy notes in regard to *16 and Pregnant*: “The decision to have the baby is presented as freely chosen” (9). While this may not always be the case, especially in seasons three and four where abortion is mentioned but not acted upon, the narrative of *16 and Pregnant* relies on the first decisions that subjugate the teen mother into the realm of postfeminist failure – she first engages in unprotected sexual intercourse (which results in the pregnancy) and then elects to continue the pregnancy and carry her child to term. Because teen pregnancy is framed by MTV within this rhetoric of choice, the teen mother can be understood through the framework of postfeminist failure because it is her poor decision to engage in sexual behavior which brought on the unplanned pregnancy she now must handle.

### ***16 AND PREGNANT AND POSTFEMINISM***

Meet Farrah, Kayla, Jamie, and Lindsey. These four teen mothers, as revealed through a narrative analysis of each of their *16 and Pregnant* episodes, exemplify two

overarching ways in which signifiers of postfeminism are present within *16 and Pregnant*. First, the show is framed as the diary of the pregnant teen, what Laurie Ouellette calls a “simulated diary form” (“It’s Not...” 248). Bound in a spiral notebook, the show takes on other diary-like qualities, including sporadic voice-over reflections by each girl and moments where sketch animation that mirrors drawings girls might make in a diary or notebook add to the visual aesthetics of the television program. This diary-styled framework bookends each commercial break within *16 and Pregnant*, and is thus a repeated motif that marks the shows’ continual entry into and surveillance over each girl’s life. Letizia Guglielmo and Kimberly Wallace Stewart, in their piece on *16 and Pregnant*, argue that these characteristics lead MTV to engage in a “personal narrative” mode of address (20). Enclosing the narrative of these pregnant teens within a diary is interesting in light of theories of postfeminism, as Angela McRobbie discusses the importance of the diary to postfeminist thinking: “Individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures. They must do this internally and individualistically, so that self-monitoring practices (the diary, the lifeplan, the career pathway) replace reliance on set ways and structured pathways” (“Post-Feminism...” 260). These diaries chronicle the girls’ trials and tribulations as teen mothers and are individualized for each girl, reinforcing the personal journey that is being depicted in each episode of *16 and Pregnant*. The visual element of this journal-like framing and the animation that accompanies it serves as an illustrative reminder of the young age of these mothers. This overt visual engagement with girls’ culture and the private practices of young females



influences how *16 and Pregnant*'s teen mothers are understood as girls, as teenagers, and as teen mothers.

These diaries function, as shown through my analysis, as chronicles of these girls' postfeminist failures. In her discussion of *16 and Pregnant*, Amanda Rossie asserts that the show's "visual components," especially its use of animation, are problematic: "By intermixing scenes of partner violence, painful births, and tragic storylines with caricatures of these very same moments, the show gives viewers room to psychologically distance themselves from the *real* effects these problematic representations of race, class, sexuality, and gendered violence truly have" (111). Rossie contends that the use of animation trivializes how the cautionary tales of *16 and Pregnant* are interpreted by MTV's audience and more widely in terms of cultural reception. Following Rossie's rationale, I find that the animation lessens the intensity and spectacle of moments that confirm these girls' postfeminist failures. The moment when jail bars drop in front of Kayla, discussed and pictured later in this chapter, is one of these instances where the gravity of the decision Kayla is facing – to marry JR and lose the day-to-day support of her mother – is lessened through the visual mode of address switching from real-life to animation. The use of animation, in creating distance between the unfolding events and the audience for them, undercuts or makes less serious the postfeminist failures these girls personify – perhaps to make the show less emotionally heavy or to counterbalance the seriousness of teen pregnancy and its consequences for the carefree teenage lifestyle idealized in much media content. Rossie continues: "[*16 and Pregnant*'s] reliance on

animation frames to infantilize, fantasize, and fetishize within the narrative structure” and this includes specifically “fetishiz[ing] the pregnant teenage body” (112,113).

This idea of fetishizing and infantilizing the young pregnant female’s body is related to my previous point that the animated aspects of *16 and Pregnant* constantly remind the audience of the youthfulness of these mothers. This fetishization of the pregnant teen girl, particularly of her pregnant belly (pictured and discussed below), functions to remind the audience that these young women are not supposed to be pregnant; the animation points to this particularly youthful pregnant body as spectacularly non-normative. These teenagers are not supposed to be mothers and thus symbolize failed adolescence, including failed self-sexual management, as discussed in the Introduction through my discussion of female adolescent sexuality. This visual representation of postfeminist failure touches upon Angela McRobbie’s notion of the postfeminist masquerade, as theories of postfeminism privilege the hyperfeminine female body as a locus for personal power. The pregnant belly presents an aberrant image when viewed through the lens of postfeminism, and is fetishized because it lacks the power centered in the ideal postfeminist subject’s normatively feminine body where “no aspect of physical appearance can be left unattended to” (McRobbie *The Aftermath* 66). Additionally, animation is a traditionally juvenile medium, and its employment within the narrative of *16 and Pregnant* works to visually convey the paradox the teenage mother represents. The teenage mother’s life, as represented by MTV, is not carefree, as animation would initially suggest through its childish connotations; instead, it is marked by failure.

Returning to the notion of the diary, *16 and Pregnant* is not the first televisual program focused on girls to use the diary as a narrative device. Moya Luckett discusses *Gidget* (1965-1966, ABC) and its use of the diary as strategy to tease out the contradiction that the female teenager is neither childlike nor an adult in this fictional program: “*Gidget* used confessions, diaries, direct address, and voice-overs to represent the *internal* contradictions of teen femininity” (102). *16 and Pregnant* uses all these modes of address, though the diary is the most salient visually. Thus, Luckett’s notion that these stylistic choices stand in for the confusion that is teenage girlhood can be extrapolated to *16 and Pregnant*; in this reality program, the diary stands in for the internal turmoil the teen mother experiences because of her postfeminist failures. These failures are compounded upon those which Luckett identifies as marking “the internal contradictions of teen femininity.” Through multiple modes of address cited by Luckett, *Gidget*, via its lead character, is able to convey to its audience the less visible anxieties and pressures of teenage girlhood. While Gidget writes in her diary, each episode of *16 and Pregnant* is meant to function like a diary that documents the life of one teen mother. The diary is traditionally understood as a document used to track one’s life and potentially even to better oneself through learning from prior mistakes. More so than the mere presence of a written diary, *16 and Pregnant* uses the diary format to document teen motherhood in an extremely individualistic manner.

The second marker of postfeminist thought that is reflected in the overall narrative of *16 and Pregnant* is the self-centeredness of each teen mother. This personality trait can be considered a hyperbolic manifestation of the individualism of the postfeminist subject.

Anita Harris explains: “Young women are taught to contain their emotions, but also themselves by managing to overcome the ‘self-centeredness of childhood.’ This supposedly natural process of identity development dovetails nicely with hegemonic modes of feminine behaviour” (*Everything* 121). The teen mothers featured on *16 and Pregnant* are still children, in the sense that they have not overcome what is constructed to be a normal selfish adolescent phase. The egocentric ethos in *16 and Pregnant* is heightened by the combination of the teen mother’s young age and her social status as a minor, still legally dependent on her parents. Oftentimes, each teen mother featured on *16 and Pregnant* does not take full advantage of the structures of support she may have available to her, especially if her family is willing and able to help her through her pregnancy and transition into motherhood. Anastasia Todd explains in her analysis of MTV’s shows that ideal teen motherhood centers on a “willingness to forego all selfish desire” (35). So, because of MTV’s featured teen mothers’ focus on themselves over other people in their lives, including the babies on the way, they fail to even adhere to what Todd has outlined as normative teenage motherhood.

Though *16 and Pregnant* is about the controversial social issue of teen pregnancy, each narrative is about one pregnant teen and *her* drama. MTV’s storylines are highly individualized, heightening the narrative emphasis on the already self-centered nature of each teen mother. For instance, the teen mothers worry about the changes to their bodies during their pregnancies. Issues related to transformations of the pregnant body are addressed, but in extremely narcissistic ways. Farrah tells her doctor, without giving him a chance to verify the truthfulness of her claim, that she will not breastfeed because she

heard it can make her breasts saggy, which would interfere with her hopes of a modeling career (1.2). With regard to weight gain during pregnancy, Kayla disgustedly remarks, “Are my legs really going to be that big?” when trying on maternity pants with her mother (2.17). These comments by Farrah and Kayla invoke McRobbie’s notion of the postfeminist masquerade again, as each girl is preoccupied with the changes to her body that will negatively influence her power as a result of losing, at least temporarily during her pregnancy, her normatively feminine body – though Farrah’s concern is more about her post-partum body. McRobbie explains: “There are many variants of the post-feminist masquerade ... but in essence it comprises a re-ordering of femininity so that old fashioned styles (rules about hats, bags, shoes, etc.), which signal submission to some invisible authority or to an opaque set of instructions, are re-instated” (*The Aftermath* 66). The pregnant body, especially a teenage pregnant body, is seen as a spectacle that interrupts the tacit set of rules that govern the comportment of the feminine body that McRobbie describes as encapsulating the postfeminist masquerade. Through this lack of conformity, the pregnant bodies of MTV’s teenage mothers lack the power associated with those of ideal postfeminist subjects, marking these girls’ postfeminist failures in yet another manner.

#### **NARRATIVE STRUCTURE**

*16 and Pregnant*’s narrative structure is quite limited, as each teen mother is only followed by MTV’s cameras for a short period of time before, during, and after the birth of their child which limits what material the crew can gather to construct the girls’ narrative. This structuring for the series creates no long-term trajectory, or basis for

surveillance, for the narratives of each teen mother. Instead, this structure produces a truncated representation of the experience of teen motherhood as each *16 and Pregnant* episode lasts one hour. Due to these narrative limitations, moments that show how these teen mothers exemplify postfeminist failure are largely restricted to the circumstances surrounding the conception of their children and discourses of pregnancy prevention. Hence, I follow the narrative framework of *16 and Pregnant* through four episodes of the program, highlighting moments that demonstrate my conception of postfeminist failure as they arise.

*16 and Pregnant*'s narrative can be broken down into discrete plot points, akin to those used in film analysis, which each episode engages to tell the story of the teen mother featured on that particular episode. I am not the only scholar to posit that *16 and Pregnant* has a clear and consistent mode of storytelling; Caryn Murphy points to *16 and Pregnant*'s "narrative structure" and suggests that the storytelling on the program is thus "not extemporaneous" (7). Additionally, May Friedman calls this narrative structuring "formulaic" in her analysis of *16 and Pregnant* (68). Yet, while scholars have pointed to MTV's method of storytelling in this franchise as following a particular formula, I have not encountered a narrative analysis analogous to the one I conduct below that examines what these plot points may be. I pose five key segments of *16 and Pregnant*'s narrative structure that occur in each episode including: "the introduction of the teen mother and her pregnancy," "critical conversations about teen pregnancy," "the baby's arrival," "adjusting to motherhood," and "the closing monologue." More detail on each is

provided in the following sections, including how each segment engages the idea of these teen mothers embodying postfeminist failure.

### **INTRODUCTION OF SELF AND PREGNANCY**

Each episode starts with the pregnant teen introducing herself. She gives background about her life, her family situation, and her goals. Take, for instance, Jamie who explains: “I’m halfway through my senior year and next fall I want to go to college and study radiation therapy. I’m a really good student. I get straight A’s and I’m on the student council, so everyone was kind of shocked when I started dating Ryan” (3.3). Jamie is a high achieving, middle-class, “can-do” girl – she has a lifeplan, ambitions, and does well in school.

After these introductions, the pregnancy is introduced. This fact is not apparent until each teen mother states, “because ... I’m pregnant.” This phrase serves as a qualifier for why each teen’s “can-do” life is about to change dramatically and creates an aura of spectacle around the pregnant teenager’s body. Consider Lindsey’s admission of her pregnancy: “I’m starting my senior year of high school in the fall and plan on going to college and becoming a police detective. But that’s not my only dream – I’m also training to become a professional cage fighter and a model. But achieving all my dreams is about to become a lot harder because ... I’m pregnant” (4.4). Pregnancy is framed in the narrative as an unanticipated roadblock, depicted by a close-up of the teens’ pregnant belly that turns to animation (shown below). The way the pregnancy is revealed by the pregnant teen, as a contingency verbally and dramatically revealed visually with a special

close-up shot that has been masked until that point, also expresses the forthcoming changes to the “can-do” girls’ lifeplan that must now take place quite rapidly.

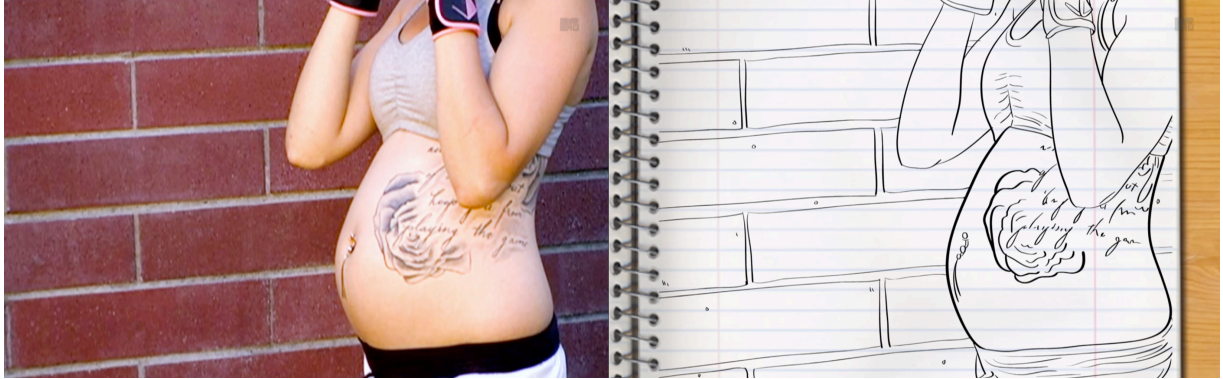


Illustration 3: Lindsey Admitting She’s Pregnant.  
Source/Copyright: MTV.com (Author Screenshot)

### CONVERSATIONS AND REACTIONS

After meeting the teen mother, the audience meets her peers, family, and the father of the child in order to establish their perceptions of the pregnancy. The peer conversation is usually accompanied by a discussion of contraceptives among a small group of close friends. Kayla, when talking to her friends about her pregnancy and how it happened, uses herself and her failure as an example for how they should not behave sexually; she claims that her pregnancy should serve as “advice to [them] to always wear a raincoat” (2.17). She and her boyfriend JR were not using condoms when she became pregnant. This absence of the use of contraceptives is not always the case for how the pregnancy happened, as Lindsey’s story reveals, and perhaps works to dispel, a popular myth about a teen girl’s ability to get pregnant: “We would use [condoms] a lot, we really did. And then one time we did it before without a condom and we didn’t get pregnant. So



I kind of thought that I couldn't get pregnant for some reason" (4.4). Lindsey's ignorance of the biological fact that she could get pregnant anytime she engaged in unprotected sex clouded her judgment and convinced her, through faulty logic, that she could not get pregnant after it did not happen one time. This attitude is common among teens; Lindsey's story is a lesson that no teen is immune from pregnancy when engaging in unprotected sex. What is also common among teens is the attitude that sexuality is part of teenage life. Hence, these peer conversations help the audience of the show become knowledgeable subjects, like the teen mothers. The audience can see failures like Kayla's and Lindsey's and choose to regularly use condoms or other forms of birth control when they are sexually active.

The family conversations serve a different function. These conversations employ the rhetoric of choice as pressure for the teen mother to make the "right" decisions. Overwhelmingly, the pregnant teen's parents accept her situation though they are not pleased about the circumstances. Kayla's father reflects: "It should have been several years down the road," as Kayla's pregnancy has altered her college plans (2.17). Yet, not all parents are *initially* as accepting; Farrah's mother wants her to put her child up for adoption, claiming: "it might be the most loving thing" (1.2). Both Jamie and Lindsey's mothers want their daughters to get abortions (3.3, 4.4). This maternal pressure on each of these girls to consider abortion echoes Anita Harris' assertion that "can-do" girlhood, what each mother wants her daughter to continue to embody, is sustained through delayed motherhood. Yet, once abortion is rejected as an option, the mothers of the teen mothers take time to acclimate to the idea that their children are going to have children,

ending their daughters' "can-do" status. Jamie's mother is especially wary as she is a single mother herself and does not see Jamie's boyfriend as a dependable father figure. She warns Jamie of the consequences she anticipates as a result of Jamie's choice to keep the child: "You have no idea what you are in for ... you've got to be prepared to do it alone" (3.3).

Next, the father of the child becomes an active participant in the narrative. In Farrah's case, her ex-boyfriend is unaware of her pregnancy. The other three teen mothers analyzed in this chapter have taxed relationships with the fathers of their children. Overall, the fathers are marginalized figures within *16 and Pregnant*. Even JR, who prepares to provide for his new family, is de-emphasized over Kayla's desire to remain dependent on her mother. Kayla is framed as lucky, since JR assumes his responsibility as the baby's father, proposes to her, and wants to provide for their family. Kayla reflects, "Now it's not me and my baby daddy," and is relieved that she has the support of her partner instead of an absent paternal figure for her child-to-be. But she still has trouble imagining life without the support of her mother<sup>19</sup> (2.17). This reticence is further witnessed as Kayla reflects on the changes in her life: "I thought getting pregnant in high school was scary, but taking on the responsibility of a household and a baby is terrifying" (2.17). While she says these words, the show visually turns to sketch animation as jail bars fall in front of Kayla as she holds her child – her individualism is

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<sup>19</sup> When Kayla notes relief that JR is more than a "baby daddy," Kayla is engaging with popular discourses about unmarried couples who have children. In taking responsibility for his child, supporting Kayla through her pregnancy, and committing himself to Kayla through his proposal of marriage, JR is not just the man who impregnated Kayla anymore, as he fully commits himself to his new family.

gone. Kayla is trapped because of her teen pregnancy. She did not think about the consequences of her pregnancy until she was faced with the decision to marry JR and to thus leave her childhood home, and symbolically her childhood, behind. While she does not want to leave her parent's home and lose the day-to-day support of her mother, she must follow JR's lead, grow up, and face the reality that terrifies her.

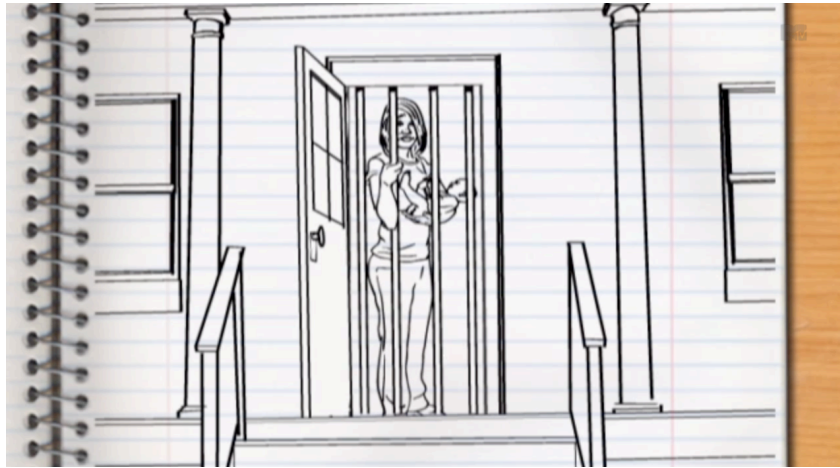


Illustration 4: Kayla Feeling Trapped.  
Source/Copyright: MTV.com (Author Screenshot)

Jamie and Lindsey are not as lucky as Kayla; their boyfriends are framed as undependable. Jamie holds onto hope that her boyfriend Ryan will stop partying, yet when she goes into labor, he is unreachable. Later it is revealed that he has been cheating on her. Jamie is justifiably angry: "We've been talking about this moment for nine months and now that it's here, Ryan is MIA" (3.3). Ryan arrives five hours into Jamie's labor and reeking of alcohol. After their baby is born, Jamie sends Ryan home, signaling the end of their relationship. Lindsey's issues with her boyfriend Forest are similar to Jamie's. Instead of partying, Forest is not willing to get a job to help support their

growing family. In addition to being pregnant, Lindsey has been working part-time at McDonald's to save money and is bitter that Forest is not contributing as well. Lindsey is the one doing all the planning: "Getting ready for the baby is going to cost way more than I thought and my paycheck from work isn't really going to cut it. So Forest and I are going to have to work together" (4.4). Forest is framed as not being willing to work with Lindsey, and his mother even intervenes and tells Lindsey that Forest needs to finish high school before he gets a job. Unlike Jamie, who is left as a single mother, Lindsey chooses to have Forest in her life, even if he is not exactly what she needs him to be.

All of these girls take on the responsibility and primary decision-making regarding their children and relationships – Kayla in deciding not to rush into marriage with JR, Jamie in deciding that she is better off without Ryan, and Lindsey in accepting the help that Forest will provide and his presence in their child's life. As discussed in my Introduction, more often than not, the onus is on the female in a relationship to maintain the health of that relationship, including taking measures to prevent pregnancy if sexual intercourse is taking place. The teen mother, because she literally carries the child in her uterus, takes on the burden of responsibility for her child once she realizes she is pregnant. Lindsey is a prime example of taking responsibility for her actions and expecting her boyfriend Forest to do the same. Yet, Forest does not emulate Lindsey's commitment to provide for her new family, and this topic becomes a constant point of contention between the two. At a point of escalation Forest accuses Lindsey of getting pregnant to tie him down, a provocative statement that can be traced back to Anita Harris' assertion above; it is the female's (Lindsey's) responsibility to be actively

preventing pregnancy. Within the context of Jamie and Lindsey's individual journeys as teen mothers, Ryan and Forest are framed as teen fathers who do not become responsible men who could be supportive partners to Jamie and Lindsey. These two girls, through not having men to help them through their pregnancies and transitions into motherhood, demonstrate high degrees of individualized power and agency that can be interpreted as feminist because each girl does not need the help of a man to succeed as a teen mother.

Despite moments like the one noted above that may represent spaces for feminist agency and postfeminist success on the part of the teen mother, these conversations also engage notions of postfeminist failure through the fact that the teen mother's life is irreversibly altered because of her unplanned pregnancy. The teen mother becomes an example for her peers of what not to be and what to avoid at all costs. In many ways, she also becomes a walking public service announcement to always practice safe sex. To her family, she is more often than not a disappointment. Her pregnancy represents the end of a lot of opportunities that her parents hoped she would have. In relation to the father of the child, she takes on the burden of the pregnancy, as her life changes from the moment of conception while the fathers are not as quick to take responsibility for their behavior that led to an unplanned pregnancy.

#### **THE BABY'S ARRIVAL**

The actual arrival of the child is an overlooked narrative element in *16 and Pregnant*, as the show focuses more on following the individual journey of the girls' teen pregnancy than the birth of the child. Notably, Kayla and Lindsey's births are not shown.

Instead, dialogue along the lines of stating, “now I’m a mom,” or photo montages stand in for actual depictions of labor.<sup>20</sup>

For Farrah, who is shown giving birth, not even seven hours of labor alters her self-centered nature. As she is pushing, she matter-of-factly states: “I am so sorry everyone has to look at my crotch right now,” to which her doctor promptly replies, “the modesty has to go right out the window at this point,” and the pushing resumes (1.2). Jamie’s labor is the more graphic depiction of the two, as she is shown throwing up while in labor, and the doctors have to use forceps to speed up her child’s delivery when it becomes risky (3.3).

This element of the journey, when depicted, is minimized and the dramatic life moments that occur during the teen mother’s pregnancy and after the child is born are continually privileged. This nearly complete elision of the process of giving birth can be interpreted in relation to the girls’ minor age and generational status as teenagers. The narrative of *16 and Pregnant* is much more about the teen mother as a person than about her pregnancy. This emphasis on the teen mother, her life, and the consequences of her decision to keep her child contribute to the framing of *16 and Pregnant* as a cautionary tale for other “at-risk” (of becoming pregnant) girls. The issue of teen pregnancy and its personal ramifications for the teen mothers’ original lifeplan is privileged; the birth of the baby is merely a continual signifier of these girls’ initial postfeminist failure.

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<sup>20</sup> The lack of showing each girl’s birthing process may be a result of individual privacy agreements between each girl and MTV, as *16 and Pregnant* is inconsistent in how each birth is shown and if the birth is shown at all.

## AFTERMATH – ADJUSTING TO MOTHERHOOD

After each child is born, each teen mother is seen dealing with the repercussions of her choices made before and during her pregnancy. These repercussions play out in an ever-increasing loss of previous identity, autonomy, and individualism for each teen mother. Farrah laments: “Taking care of Sophia is going to be a lot more work that I ever imagined. They don’t teach any of this in high school” (1.2). Farrah does not heed all the warnings from her mother of the hardships of new motherhood until the audience witnesses her waking up every hour and a half to feed her daughter. As with many of the teen mothers on *16 and Pregnant*, Farrah mourns the loss of her carefree high school days: “When I thought about pulling an all-nighter for my senior year, I was thinking parties, prom, or cramming for finals, but now it means something totally different” (1.2). Jamie’s journey as a new single mother is similar to Farrah’s; yet more than lamenting her situation, Jamie’s concerns are about how her new situation will affect her previous lifeplan. She reflects: “I used to have every detail of my future planned out, but now I’m not sure what’s ahead of me, and it’s pretty scary” (3.3). Unlike Farrah who finishes high school through online classes at the local community college, Jamie returns to high school to finish her senior year. When she does, she feels the abrupt change: “Just getting to school felt like a full day’s work, but after being out for a month, I know the hard part is just beginning” (3.3). Teen mothers like Farrah and Jamie, after adjusting to their new lives, realize that everything after birth is an uphill battle. For the first time, they must continuously think of someone beside themselves.

## CLOSING MONOLOGUE

The closing monologue of each episode of *16 and Pregnant* is the cornerstone of the narrative. In this moment, the teen mother reflects on her overall experience through a single camera shot, usually while sitting on her bed. The overarching theme of these monologues is that everything happened too fast and that if she could repeat the experience, the teen mother would wait to start a family. This is not framed as a message of abstinence, but rather a message of realism, aimed at the target audience of the program. Kayla's dialogue begins with her reflecting that even though she is a teen mother, she is not willing to rush into a marriage with JR. She wants life to slow down:

When I had unprotected sex, I really wish I would have thought it through more because even though I had all the love and support in the world, the emotional struggle that you have to go through along with being pregnant is really really hard and I just want to slow down my life a little bit. I want to finish my senior year and graduate and enjoy the summer and then, you know, see where the rest goes. (2.17)

Even in this message of realism, Kayla is still trying as hard as she can to hold onto her "can-do" lifestyle and original lifeplan. With a child, she no longer is afforded the freedom to "see where the rest goes." Yet, in not marrying JR immediately and relying on her mother for help, she is able to retain some of the remnants of her adolescence.

While Kayla longs for the past, Lindsey desires the future and the stability that will presumably come with it. She wants to resume her "can-do" life; she returns to cage fighting training and relies on Forest to care for their daughter during her training and work shifts: "I know that I got myself into a lot with having to be a mom 24/7 and still trying to become a professional cage fighter. I would do anything to be out of school



already and have a career and have my own home. I just wish I would have waited” (4.4). With this longing for the future, or the past, still comes the message about waiting to have a child. Yet, with Lindsey this message is different than Kayla’s. Lindsey longs to be a grown woman with a career, home, family, and stability more than to return to her life before she was pregnant. This closing moment is especially important to any narrative because it is the last one that is seen before the journal closes and the story is done. The messages of waiting to have a child and longing for a better, or different, future resonate with ideas of postfeminism. These teen mothers are constructed as postfeminist failures, yet they try as hard as they can to negate this positioning.

#### ***TEEN MOM AND POSTFEMINISM***

Though they are a part of what I call a franchise of programming, *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* are framed much differently than *16 and Pregnant*, both visually and narratively. *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* each feature four girls originally profiled on *16 and Pregnant*, extending each featured girl’s initial journey as a teen mother over what has become multiple seasons, and thus multiple years of MTV surveillance. Despite these programs narrative differences, the teen mothers featured within the franchise remain front and center on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. With their sustained focus on these young women over a longer period of time, *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, more extensively than *16 and Pregnant*, exploit the teen mothers featured as postfeminist failures. While the definition of this failure does not change across the three programs, what does differ between *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* is how those postfeminist failures are addressed. While *16 and Pregnant* focuses on the featured girls’

pregnancies and the failures that stem from it, *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* emphasize these girls' failures as young mothers.

Paralleling the diary framework of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* are framed as scrapbooks (Thomas 112). The way these stories are visualized can even be likened to baby books, considering the fact that they continuously chronicle the lives of the teen mothers and their children. As in *16 and Pregnant*, these programs narratively privilege drama in the teen mother's life over other potential storylines, such as those centering on the child. This shift from diary to scrapbook follows the move from each teen mother being featured once in an hour-long episode to being followed for what has now turned into years. As discussed in my Introduction, *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* adopt a more traditionally ethnographic ethos as they follow the featured teen mothers over time, as they raise their children and continue to face challenges that would not be part of their lives if they had not become pregnant as teenagers. While the narrative structure of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* moves away from the formulaic narrative of *16 and Pregnant*, the featured teen mothers continue to exemplify postfeminist failure as they navigate co-parenting, furthering their education, and financial burdens, all while raising their children.

*Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* function as an extended aftermath of each girl's *16 and Pregnant* episode. This "extended aftermath" is evidenced through the framing of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* as continuous narratives that move between the stories of the featured teen mothers with no finite beginning, middle, or end. Even between episodes and seasons, each girl's life as a young mother is turbulent, and MTV focuses on

spectacular moments that exemplify this chaos in the narratives of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. Each girl's life is surveilled and up for display in these shows, and the continued drama in each teen mother's life is exploited through their extended, multi-year performances for MTV's cameras (and MTV's audience). While these girls age out of their teenage years, they do not age out of their identity as teen mothers – this subjectivity is the basis of their fame and why they were featured in MTV's franchise in the first place.

This sense of an “extended aftermath” fits into generic definitions of the docu-soap subgenre of reality television that I explained in my Introduction. By adhering to the generic conventions of this particular kind of reality television, including a focus on everyday life and the construction of narratives that entertain more than anything else, this sense of extended, and even endless, aftermath stemming from teen pregnancy facilitates a continual understanding of MTV's featured teen mothers as postfeminist failures. Laurie Ouellette explains that these programs “adopt the conventions of reality entertainment, including the mixing of actuality and melodrama” (“It's Not...” 248). (Melo)drama is especially salient in *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*'s storytelling, as the bulk of the narratives about the teen mothers center on what Ouellette defines as “microdrama,” including “clashes with boyfriends, classmates, and parents as well as anxieties and everyday challenges related to teen pregnancy and child rearing” (“It's Not...” 248-249).

The narrative arc of each of these two programs takes place over twelve episodes per season, and four (*Teen Mom*) to five (*Teen Mom 2*) seasons for each iteration. The

extensive period of time that each series covers allows the audience to follow the featured girls for several years. Hence, the postfeminist failures that become apparent on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* stem from the more banal, everyday, and affective and emotional labor of being a teen mother. This extended aftermath has no clear-cut conclusion or narrative resolution, as *Teen Mom* has aired spin-off shows for each featured girl<sup>21</sup> and *Teen Mom 2* is still on air. This sense of endlessness within MTV's teen pregnancy franchise relates to John Fiske's conception of "an infinite endless middle" in his discussion of soap operas (470). While Fiske is talking about singular narratives, rather than a franchise of programming, his assertions hold true as the docu-soap subgenre of reality television relies heavily on generic conventions of soap operas. Fiske explains: "Traditional realist narratives are constructed to have a beginning, middle, and end, but soap opera realism works through an infinite extended middle" (470). He continues: "This infinitely extended middle means that soap operas are never in a state of equilibrium, but their world is one of perpetual disturbance and threat" (470). The entire narrative structure of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* rests on the "disturbances" and "threats" that arise from teen pregnancy; they constitute the drama of the show and propel it forward. How those "disturbances" arise and are resolved drive the narratives of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. As Fiske theorizes: "The outcome of most plotlines is relatively unimportant, and not really in doubt. What matters is the process that people have to go through to achieve it" (471).

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<sup>21</sup> These include "Being Maci" which aired on August 18, 2013, and "Being Farrah," "Being Catelynn," and "Being Amber," which aired back-to-back on February 23, 2014.

*Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* produce melodrama, or “microdrama” according to Ouellette, in their relentless focus on the teen mother and the turmoil in her life caused, for the most part, by her unplanned pregnancy. Thus, I begin my narrative analysis of the two series by relating the generic conventions usually ascribed to melodramatic content and soap operas to the narrative format of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. Each series features four teen mothers simultaneously, which supports Jane Feuer’s discussion of the narrative structure of soap operas: “Daytime and prime-time serials share a narrative form consisting of multiple plot lines and a continuing narrative (no closure)” (4). While *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* are reality content, not soap operas, the soap opera generic conventions are especially resonant in these programs. In addition to the multiple plot lines and lack of any concrete ending, as each is seen as fleeting or “temporary,” even with the series finale of *Teen Mom* in 2012, another soap-operatic convention that *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* employ in its storytelling is a great deal of “inter-episodic redundancy” (Gledhill 113, Allen 102). Robert Allen explains this concept as it exists in soap operas: “soaps always walk a thin line between moving the narrative along too quickly, and thus ‘using it up’ too soon, and stretching sub-plots out for too long, and thereby risking boring the audience” (102). This repetition is reflected not only in MTV’s storytelling strategies, but also in the decisions the teen mothers make, especially regarding their relationships with the fathers of their children. Chelsea is a prime example of this repetition with her on-again, off-again relationship with the father of her daughter that constitutes the bulk of her narrative over many seasons of *Teen Mom 2*.

## NARRATIVE THEMES

Since the narrative structure of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* differs so substantially from *16 and Pregnant*, so too does the means by which I analyze *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. Rather than focusing on plot points, as no comparable ones to those in *16 and Pregnant* exist in the other programs, I use thematic clustering to analyze the unfolding narratives on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. While *16 and Pregnant* focuses on the experience of teen pregnancy, *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, as the titles suggest, focus on the experience of teen motherhood. The different subjectivities and identities that are relevant for teen pregnancy versus teen motherhood affect what it means to be a postfeminist failure as a pregnant teen versus as a teen mother. These teen mothers continually fail to measure up to the norms of postfeminist girlhood and womanhood discussed in the Introduction. Their nostalgia for normal teenage life and the broken fantasy of what teen motherhood might be like versus reality propel much of these girls' continual failings. Hence, the thematic clusters that guide my narrative analysis of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* draw upon cultural failures of being a teen mother and parenting failures. The teen mother is seen as a failure and incapable only because she is assessed against the capable postfeminist woman discussed by theorists like Angela McRobbie.

## AN EDUCATION

Anita Harris, as noted in the Introduction, holds up education as a sustaining element of “can-do” girlhood, and thus indicative of postfeminist success. Education is important to the teen mothers of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* who struggle either to finish

their high school education or to complete college courses while caring for children who require a great deal of time and attention.

Of the girls who struggle to finish high school, a middle-class expectation of these girls, both Amber (*Teen Mom*) and Chelsea (*Teen Mom 2*) opt for a GED over a high school diploma. Over the course of Season 2 of *Teen Mom*, Amber struggles to prioritize her education with the other responsibilities she juggles. She even has a pregnancy scare at the beginning of the season, bringing up issues of how her education would ever be completed if she were to have another child (2.1). Chelsea states early on in Season 1 of *Teen Mom 2* that it is her primary goal to get her GED, yet she is continually sidetracked by her turbulent relationship with Adam, the father of her child. By Season 3, she has still not completed her GED. It is only when she decides she wants to attend beauty school, and the school requires a high school diploma or GED for her to enroll, that Chelsea finally finishes her high school education and starts beauty school in early Season 4. Even then, she has trouble putting her education first. As a single mother faced with an unplanned move, she takes a leave from beauty school for a month, returning during the final episode of the fourth season of *Teen Mom 2* (4.9).

Many of the teen moms attempt to take college courses, yet childcare and financial needs associated with young motherhood are barriers to their success. These obstacles are focused upon over the success of finishing high school and starting college. Maci finds it hard to keep up with her classes over the course of all four seasons of *Teen Mom*. She even considers withdrawing altogether after taking many incompletes in her coursework (3.9). Farrah faces similar struggles, yet is able to finish her Associates

degree during Season 3 of *Teen Mom* and moves from Iowa to Florida to pursue a Bachelors degree in Season 4. Both Jenelle and Kailyn, featured on *Teen Mom 2*, find financing college a particular obstacle; Jenelle is able to get her mother, who maintains custody of her son, to co-sign so she can qualify for financial aid and Kailyn borrows money from the father of her son in order to make her school payment on time (1.6, 1.4).

### **HAPPILY EVER AFTER?**

Many girls dream of a fairytale romance much like they see in most mainstream media targeted at young girls, but what happens to that fairytale for these teen mothers? With the notion of a “happily ever after” comes the fantasy of getting married and then having a family. The failure to make the family unit function in a healthy manner drives many of the narratives on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*.

The only girl featured across *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* who maintains a relationship with the father of her child is Catelynn; she is also the only teen mother featured on *Teen Mom* or *Teen Mom 2* who puts her child up for adoption. Even so, her relationship with Tyler is not without its issues, turmoil, and near-break ups as they struggle with the aftermath of choosing adoption. The two got engaged during Season One of *Teen Mom*, but have not gotten married.

While Maci and Ryan break up during Season One of *Teen Mom*, the two manage to adjust to co-parenting over time. Each finds new significant others as well, though those relationships are always taxed by the co-parenting relationship they are forced to have with each other. While Maci lets go of her fantasy of a family unit including her, Ryan, and their son Bentley, other teen mothers on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* are not as



successful in navigating the relationships with the fathers of their children. Amber and Gary have a toxic on and off relationship that turns violent, yet they want their daughter Leah to have a family and continually come back to each other. Similarly, Chelsea cannot let go of the fantasy of her and Adam raising their daughter Aubree together. Chelsea's father continually expresses that Chelsea needs to get Adam, a very bad influence, out of her life, yet Chelsea ignores her father's advice time and time again. Each time she returns to Adam or gives him another chance, which is too numerous over the four seasons of *Teen Mom 2*, represents her failure to be autonomous and to be realistic about who Adam is in her life. A pregnancy scare finally stops this cycle with Adam, and Chelsea is able to move forward with her life by going to beauty school (4.1).

Leah and Kailyn, both featured on *Teen Mom 2*, do get married. Yet, both do not ultimately settle down with the fathers of their children and instead find a new male figure to stand in for the ones that did not last. Leah is the mother of twins, and marries Jeremy after her relationship with Corey ends. She and Corey were married as well, but divorced when Corey found out that Leah cheated on him with her ex-boyfriend two weeks before their wedding (2.11). Leah meets Jeremy a mere two episodes after her divorce is finalized in Season 3, and the two quickly move in together, get pregnant, experience a miscarriage, and get engaged all by midway through Season 4. Leah is one teen mother who strives for a partner to raise her twins and clings to the fantasy of a happy family, perhaps because her daughter Ali struggles with developmental issues and requires extensive medical care throughout *Teen Mom 2*.

## GETTING IN TROUBLE

While the postfeminist failures on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* discussed until this point are quite tame in nature – no laws are broken, no one is seriously injured – some of these teen mothers get into some serious trouble over the course of their time on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. These problems include domestic violence, drug use, and prison time. Two of the teen mothers are continually in trouble – Amber and Jenelle.

Amber's volatile relationship with Gary creates an unstable home environment for the two of them to co-exist within, and consequently they fight persistently. In one of their many fights, Amber strikes Gary on camera (1.3). This incident sets off a chronology of events; Amber is subsequently investigated by the police and forced to meet with Child Protective Services. She loses custody of her daughter during the shows run, goes to jail during Season Three, enters rehab for anger management in Season Four, and serves an extended jail sentence at the series end of *Teen Mom*.<sup>22</sup>

Jenelle's problems originate from her partying lifestyle, including an addiction to marijuana. This reality is part of the reason why her mother has custody of Jenelle's son. Jenelle is one of the most unstable and unpredictable teen mothers featured by MTV. Her impulsive need to be in a relationship gets her into trouble time and time again, despite her mother's attempts to get her to take responsibility for her life. One boyfriend, Kieffer, is a particularly bad influence on Jenelle. The two are involved in a domestic violence incident that puts Kieffer in jail (2.3). This comes after both are arrested and charged with breaking and entering during Season 1 of *Teen Mom 2*. These charges follow Jenelle, as

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<sup>22</sup> Amber was released from jail prior to the full sentence she was convicted to serve in November 2013.

she is put on probation for the charges (2.10), enters rehab because she fails a mandatory drug test (2.11), and finally finishes her probation after serving some jail time along the way (4.3). At the end of Season 4 of *Teen Mom 2*, Kieffer returns to Jenelle's life yet again. Stress over finances and custody lead Jenelle, with Kieffer's bad influence, to hardcore drugs (4.11). Season 4 of *Teen Mom 2* ends for Jenelle with her mother attempting to get her committed into a rehabilitation facility (4.12).

While Amber and Jenelle exemplify extreme examples of what I define as postfeminist failure, the inclusion of these much more serious and tragic stories, both within *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* and in this thesis more generally, is important in framing how teen motherhood can drastically alter one's life. I would not go as far as to say that teen motherhood is the sole factor that contributed to what these girls have ultimately become. Yet the stress of young motherhood compounded the other issues these girls suffered from – both have bi-polar disorder for example – thereby only heightening the spectacle these girls are understood as, and how MTV and tabloid press have exploited them and their stories.

## CONCLUSION

While the focus of this chapter is on understanding these teen mothers as postfeminist failures, I find it important to note that there is the potential for success for these girls as well. Perhaps it is not the success that they imagined for themselves, but the featured teen mothers across *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* do carve out success for themselves – perhaps with Jenelle, Amber, and Farrah (discussed in Chapter Three) as exceptions. For instance, Maci and Catelynn both use the visibility they gained

through being featured on *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* to speak out about issues surrounding teen pregnancy – Maci speaks to high school students and Catelynn, because she chose adoption, has become a resource for girls considering that option if they face an unplanned pregnancy.

Failure is the focus of this chapter perhaps because it is more readily apparent in the narratives MTV has constructed around teen motherhood in this franchise of programming. Since MTV frames the franchise as providing cautionary tales about what teen pregnancy is really like and clearly prioritizes providing messages that are meant to deter the imagined audience from getting pregnant as a teenager, failure is embedded in the ethos of the programming. Each teen mother provides a counter-example of what the imagined audience should be. Even though their narratives are structured quite differently, this sense of failure stemming from engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse, getting pregnant at sixteen, and carrying the child to term, is true across *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*.

Jennifer Fallas, in her analysis of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, makes an interesting point about MTV in relation to other reality content they air: “MTV – the same network that unilaterally promotes the sexually available (read: ‘hot’) young white female as ideal throughout many of its other reality shows – situates the girls of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* as immoral and reckless for the same exact behaviors exhibited by females of the same age on its other shows” (50). This interesting juxtaposition of the sexualization of teenage female bodies is telling of how the franchise I analyze is quite different from MTV’s typical reality content. Similarly, what constitutes postfeminist

failure on these programs is quite different than what constitutes such failure for the rest of MTV's reality television line-up. Context is everything for girls on MTV; the repudiation and postfeminist failure of MTV's teen mothers is situated alongside reality programs like *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012) and *The Real World* (1992-) in addition to *Awkward.* (2011-) and other fictional series, where the female subjects engage in the same sexual practices as the teen mothers, but do not gain their reality-celebrity through unplanned pregnancies.

The issue I have explained at length in this chapter – that MTV constructs and exploits the teen mothers featured in its franchise's content as postfeminist failures – extends beyond the series as well. As I will explore in the next chapter, the girls profiled in MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, particularly on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, have become well known in popular culture because they are teen mothers. These girls' postfeminist failure of inappropriately managing their sexuality as adolescents has opened them up to judgment and scrutiny beyond what MTV employs on *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*. These girls' first failure of getting pregnant at a young age is not only exploited by MTV in the franchise's series, but is further manipulated, by MTV and other entities, through various other channels that continually render these particular teen mothers as what I conceive of as postfeminist failures.

### **CHAPTER THREE – WITH ONE FAILURE COMES MANY MORE: SUSTAINED POSTFEMINIST FAILURE IN MTV’S TEEN PREGNANCY FRANCHISE’S PARATEXTS**

In December 2013, Jenelle Evans, first featured on *16 and Pregnant* and then *Teen Mom 2*, was arrested as a result of a domestic dispute with the father of her newly-announced second child’s father, Nathan Griffith. According to *US Weekly*, a gossip magazine that has reported many stories about the dramatic lives of MTV’s teen mothers when they are not being followed by MTV’s cameras, this arrest is the pregnant Evans’ tenth in the past three years (McRady). Jenelle is not the only MTV teen mother who has appeared in the tabloids. As MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise has expanded and continues to be renewed for multiple seasons, the teen mothers MTV has exploited as postfeminist failures have become public figures. In these more public roles, these girls’ personal choices and everyday lives have been continually surveilled and scrutinized, and resultantly have become constant fodder for gossip-oriented media content.

Stories like those of Jenelle’s multiple arrests affect MTV and the image of its teen pregnancy franchise. Part of the controversy surrounding the issue of whether MTV was going to air Season Five of *Teen Mom 2* had to do with the poor choices and negative behavior Jenelle exhibited on camera. MTV ultimately did air the season in January 2014. From another perspective, tabloid press coverage of MTV’s teen mothers also functions to fill in the “gaps” between MTV’s series’ seasons. Su Holmes argues in her analysis of *Big Brother* (2000-, UK version): “Both the popular press and celebrity magazines claim to offer the story ‘behind’ the events in the show” (“All You’ve...” 123). Through these press articles, viewers are able to find out what is happening in

Jenelle's life between seasons of *Teen Mom 2*. Erin Meyers, when looking at MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, argues that tabloids are "purporting to offer new information *not* revealed within the show's narrative as a draw to audiences searching for the 'real' individual." Jenelle's arrest, noted above, happened so recently that it did not appear on the current season of *Teen Mom 2* that concluded its run in April 2014. Hence, the coverage of this arrest, as Meyers argues, provides information that viewers of the show alone would not know about otherwise. MTV's featured teen mothers have become notorious, and the sustained access to facts and details about their lives through tabloid and popular press adds a new dimension to my argument of postfeminist failure, moving outside of the shows themselves and into popular images of MTV's teen mothers. The imagined MTV audience is now able to see failures like Jenelle's arrest via other, non-televisual channels.

As noted earlier in this thesis, MTV's televisual programming has always been accompanied by the message of pregnancy prevention and not making the mistakes that MTV's teen mothers have and continue to make. Through this prevention messaging, MTV's reality television franchise takes on an offensive position, fighting actively *against* teen pregnancy. In moving away from these programs, I look to the non-televisual outlets, like those described above, to see how this rhetoric of pregnancy prevention is upheld or challenged. Numerous media outlets affiliated with MTV's franchise, like [www.itsyoursexlife.org](http://www.itsyoursexlife.org) and [www.stayteen.org](http://www.stayteen.org) discussed in Chapter One, direct the imagined teen girl audience to information about contraceptives, safe sex, and methods of pregnancy prevention. Prevention is a central and critical message from MTV

to its audience; the discourse espoused through *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, *Teen Mom 2*, and other media sources, is filled with discussions of waiting to have sex and girls' personal responsibility to prevent pregnancy. Knowledge is framed as empowerment within MTV's teen pregnancy reality programs – through awareness about the realities of teen pregnancy, the audience will hopefully not make the same mistakes as the girls they watch on their television screens. In other words, girls who watch these shows will presumably be saved from becoming “at-risk” girls or postfeminist failures themselves. Seeing the hardship of teen motherhood, through MTV's shows and in “news” stories like Jenelle's that come through the popular press, supports MTV's message of pregnancy prevention. As MTV frames its teen pregnancy franchise, other girls should not have to experience the failure and hardship that are the outcomes of an unplanned teenage pregnancy.

This chapter shifts to a focus on the extra-textual material about MTV's teen mothers that circulates outside of its teen pregnancy series and sometimes beyond MTV's direct control. These include materials produced by MTV, like special features, exclusive cast interviews, and bonus clips, as well as those over which MTV does not have creative control like tabloid articles. The full range of these materials is explored in the next section of this chapter. In my analysis in this chapter, I understand these extra-textual materials as paratexts and draw my own conclusions from theories of paratextuality discussed by television scholar Jonathan Gray in *Show Sold Separately*. As in Chapter Two, I focus on what I label as the “postfeminist failures” of the teen mothers featured in MTV's programming. In this chapter, I interrogate how these postfeminist failures first



constructed in *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* are then reproduced and discussed through the franchise's paratexts. I particularly focus on the reunion shows at the end of each season of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* hosted by Dr. Drew Pinsky, "Life After Labor" and "Finale Special: A Check Up with Dr. Drew" respectively. These reunion shows provide a case study of one of the many extra-textual sources within MTV's teen pregnancy franchise that demonstrates how MTV continually reproduces the featured teen mothers as postfeminist failures. I also observe the role of celebrity culture in the construction of these teen mothers as reality television celebrities and consider how this much more public positioning also reproduces these young women as postfeminist failures. First, however, I look at MTV's teen pregnancy franchise's paratexts more generally. Then I move into a close narrative and thematic analysis of the reunion shows hosted by Dr. Drew Pinsky.

#### **AN OVERVIEW OF MTV'S PARATEXTS**

Before moving into an in-depth description of paratextuality and celebrity culture, and a case study of the reunion shows, I first want to briefly discuss the range of paratexts surrounding MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. This material is varied both in the scope and depth of detail provided. Additionally, some of the material is created, sponsored, or hosted directly by MTV, while other material, like the article cited at the beginning of this chapter, exists outside the purview and direct control of the network.

I have found that MTV.com serves as the main producer of the paratexts surrounding MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. Each of the three shows has its own

MTV.com website<sup>23</sup> that hosts full episodes of each show as well as a number of different paratextual materials. These include, but are not limited to bonus clips, special features, episode recaps, blog posts, and exclusive interviews. Additionally, content moderated by Dr. Drew each season for all three shows, including the reunion specials mentioned above and “Unseen Moments” features, are available to view on this platform.

Interestingly, MTV has distinguished these specials, hosted by Dr. Drew, from the other ancillary paratexts that are available on MTV.com. While the former are accessible *only* on the MTV.com show-specific websites, the latter are available (along with full episodes of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*) on external platforms, such as Netflix, Hulu Plus, iTunes, and Amazon Instant Video.

It has become clear that MTV has curated and sustained an audience for their teen pregnancy programming through the breadth of paratexts within this franchise. I believe that this content, both the shows and paratexts, is so extensive because of how the featured teen mothers are portrayed and positioned by MTV. I argue in this chapter that the success of this franchise can be attributed, in part, to MTV’s continual exploitation of the postfeminist failures of the teen mothers featured. As I discuss in Chapter Two, shows like *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* make the featured teen mothers appear to be postfeminist failures. In this chapter, I take that assertion further and look to how the franchise’s paratexts exploit the continuous failures that the teen mothers make as they brave young motherhood.

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<sup>23</sup> [www.16andpregnant.mtv.com](http://www.16andpregnant.mtv.com), [www.teenmom.mtv.com](http://www.teenmom.mtv.com), and [www.teenmom2.mtv.com](http://www.teenmom2.mtv.com)

The teen mothers featured in MTV's teen pregnancy franchise are products of a broader postfeminist media culture theorized by Rosalind Gill and elaborated on throughout this thesis. Individualism and choice, as discussed in Chapter Two, constitute postfeminist ideals for Gill, yet MTV's teen mothers do not exemplify these attributes. These girls instead fail to live up to what have become enduring and culturally normative standards of mature feminine adulthood. These failures are individualized for each teen mother and placed within a cultural context that privileges theories of postfeminism and neoliberalism that dictate that individual people, over social institutions, are responsible for what happens to them. In MTV's paratexts, I see a continual and persistent exploitation of the failures of the featured teen mothers, beyond getting pregnant at sixteen, due to heightened publicity surrounding their lives. Considering this fact in tandem with what I view as a lack of concerted attention to these girls' triumphs in these paratexts, I see the failure-oriented discourse in MTV's franchise's paratexts as driving the popularity of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. Notably, this exploitation occurs less through the paratextual material hosted on MTV.com and more so by that which circulates through tabloid press material.

The paratexts surrounding these teen mothers play upon their cultural status as "at-risk" girls in addition to understanding these teen mothers as embodying postfeminist failure. Drawing upon the explanation I have previously discussed by Anita Harris in *Future Girl*, I understand these teen mothers as being framed by MTV as "can-do" girls that became, and continue to be seen, as "at-risk" girls through their unplanned pregnancies and subsequent poor life decisions. The emphasis on what I interpret as

postfeminist failure as being about a choice made by a single individual is emblematic of how teen motherhood is culturally denigrated and how MTV's reality texts and paratexts support these widely circulated cultural discourses.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* show the repeated failures of the mothers first featured on *16 and Pregnant*. The paratextual material within MTV's teen pregnancy franchise does the same to an even broader and more far-reaching extent. MTV has created buzz and hype around its teen pregnancy franchise and created profitable programs through this popularity and success. MTV's programs have piqued viewer interest and then MTV has exploited and sustained that interest through bonus features, exclusive interviews, blogs, and more. The material initially provided by MTV has spilled over into coverage of these teen mother's lives by other media outlets, such as *US Weekly* and *The Huffington Post*. The breadth of this paratextual material is seemingly endless and the teen mothers of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* are increasingly recognized by people who see articles about these young women in tabloid press and may not even be familiar with or have watched the shows themselves.

#### **THEORIES OF PARATEXTUALITY AND MTV'S TEEN PREGNANCY FRANCHISE**

Gray's conception of paratextuality stems from the work of Gerard Genette, as Gray unpacks what paratexts are and how they function in relation to the texts from which they originate. While there may be an assumed conception that the text comes first, followed by paratextual material, Gray, through Genette, dispels this claim: "Genette argued that we can only approach texts *through* paratexts, so that before we start reading a book, we have consumed many of its paratexts" (25). Trailers for television shows and

movies are a prime example of what Genette is thinking about when making that assertion; one watches a movie trailer in order to determine whether or not to see the film. Yet, Gray is careful to balance this argument – paratexts do not start texts, nor do texts start paratexts:

This book is not simply arguing that paratexts *start* texts, for they also create them and continue them. Thus, this book is also about the paratexts we find after a text has officially begun, and that continue to give us information, ways of looking at the film or show, and frames for understanding it or engaging with it. Their work is never over, and their effects on what the film or show *is* – on what it means to audiences – are continual. (10-11)

The effects of paratexts as continual is compelling; they draw in an audience, sustain that audience, and function in a dialogic manner with the texts themselves. Without the plethora of paratextual material surrounding MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, for instance, would the fascination with these teen mothers have persisted for five (and potentially many more) years?

Gray begins by defining what a paratext is: "A 'paratext' is both 'distinct from' and alike – or, I will argue, intrinsically part of – the text." (6). While this definition may seem oblique, paratexts are simultaneously connected to a text while also existing as texts on their own. Unlike hierarchical understandings of texts that would perhaps value the original text over its paratexts, Gray adds important nuance to this assumption. The lack of hierarchy between texts and paratexts that Gray posits is fundamental to my analysis of MTV's teen pregnancy paratexts as they can be viewed as points of entry into the franchise. For MTV, entry from a paratext – a PSA spot, a [www.itsyoursexlife.org](http://www.itsyoursexlife.org) plug, an *US Weekly* article – is not necessarily valued over watching *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, or *Teen Mom 2*, as long as these paratexts lead these potential audience members to

MTV's franchise's content. Profit is the most important objective for MTV in regard to all its programming, not just the teen pregnancy franchise. Hence, paratexts that pique enough interest to bolster viewership of the teen pregnancy shows, and thus MTV's profitability overall, are viewed as acceptable entry points to the franchise's programming. It is the entry into the franchise that is the most important outcome for MTV; once that occurs, the texts and paratexts work in tandem to produce or reproduce already dominant discourses about teen pregnancy, pregnancy prevention, and safe sexual practices.

Gray explores paratexts through a few powerful metaphors, getting at the key dimensions of paratexts and challenging any monolithic definition of paratextuality. The first metaphor is a paratext as an "outgrowth": "Even if textually the paratext may prove constitutive of that entity, paratexts are generally outgrowths of a film or program" (118). Most simply, *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* can be considered "outgrowths" of *16 and Pregnant*. These two shows are the result of following girls originally featured on *16 and Pregnant* and further extending the timeframe and level of detail that the audience is privy to with regard to these girls' lives. These outgrowths continually move outward, as *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* are the beginning of what seems like an endless catalog of paratexts associated with MTV's teen pregnancy franchise.

Closely linked to this idea of paratexts as outgrowths of a text is the notion of paratexts as "overflow." Gray cites Will Brooker when explaining this concept: "Brooker proposes the notion of 'overflow,' evoking an image of a text that is too full, too large for its own body, necessitating the spillover of textuality into paratexts" (40).

This idea of overflow originated from Brooker's analysis of paratexts surrounding *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003, The WB): "Instead of a weekly, hour-long television episode, *Dawson's Creek* is constructed as an ongoing experience" (Brooker 462). There is no shortage of paratexts surrounding MTV's teen pregnancy franchise. Between trailers, unseen moments, reunion shows, blogs, and more, the franchise has spilled over far beyond MTV's direct control with the ever-increasing tabloid press coverage of the teen mothers. Additionally, the scope of the three MTV programs centered on teen pregnancy has extended outside of MTV's allotted timeslots and delineated seasons through all the paratextual openings noted above. In talking about overflow, one must also reflect on Raymond Williams' concept of televisual "flow": "It is that the real programme that is offered is a *sequence* or set of alternative sequences of these and other similar events, which are then available in a single dimension and in a single operation" (Williams 87). The progression of a text associated with Williams' conception of flow is further expanded upon in Brooker's notion of overflow. But, the sense of singularity within understandings of flow is contested through overflow, as overflow suggests a sense of multiplicity.

Another way to view paratexts, according to Gray, is as "proliferations" of a text. Gray asserts in the introduction to his book: "Given their extended presence, any filmic or televisual text and its cultural impact, value, and meaning cannot be adequately analyzed without taking into account the film or program's many proliferations. Each proliferation, after all, holds the potential to change the meaning of the text, if only slightly" (2). This idea of paratexts changing the meaning of a text is important to

consider in my analysis, especially of Dr. Drew Pinsky and the reunion shows, as MTV provides many types of paratexts that are accessible to different audience segments that then have the ability to interpret those materials in a multiplicity of ways. In addition, this array of available paratexts can affect and adjust the meaning of occurrences in the original shows and thus how the teen mothers are understood and judged by the audience. It is reality television after all. For example, over the course of *Teen Mom 2*, Chelsea is seen as continuously returning to and unable to move beyond Adam, the father of her daughter. While the audience may become frustrated with this cyclical action while watching full episodes of *Teen Mom 2*, Chelsea's discussions with Dr. Drew in the reunion shows clarify that this impulse to return to Adam stems from Chelsea's fantasy for her daughter to have a traditional nuclear family. Chelsea explains that she wants this for her daughter because she has divorced parents. As seen through this example, it is impossible for the MTV shows to contain all the details of these young mothers' lives. This infeasibility can be partially attributed to MTV's shooting and airing schedule, as MTV cannot capture every moment of these girls' lives, nor can they include every detail in a limited number of hour-long episodes. Moreover, these girls' lives are constantly changing, as they experience a wide range of life experiences from marriage to divorce, to rehab, to plastic surgery, to second pregnancies, and more. In many ways, the paratexts may be a more suitable place for this information and these life changes to be chronicled, as they can be shared immediately as they occur. In contemporary culture, where the lines between public and private are continually blurred, the public has become accustomed to being able to access every detail of these teen mothers' lives. MTV created and sustained



that perception through *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. Through paratexts, the audience can access these teen mother's lives on an ongoing basis and through a variety of outlets available to them.

Gray uses these three metaphors and Henry Jenkins' idea of "convergence"<sup>24</sup> to exemplify the nuance inherent in paratextuality. For Gray, paratexts oscillate between these metaphors, as texts and paratexts are always in a complex and dynamic conversation:

Rather than choose between metaphors of "overflow" or "convergence," I find the ebb and flow suggested by employing both terms indicative of the multiple ways in which many media texts are both moving outward yet incorporating other texts inward, being authored across media. Between the outward overflow and the inward convergence of paratextuality, we see the beating heart of the text. (41)

There is no linear or even cyclical structure to paratextuality as Gray defines it. Rather, it is through constant fluctuations, movement, and seeing texts and paratexts in relation to each other that meaning can be derived from paratexts. The inward and outward pressures balance each other; paratextuality is an exercise of continual and multi-sited authorship and meaning making. This movement can be seen in MTV's teen pregnancy franchise through how stories that first circulate in popular press are then shown in MTV's series, as the content that is aired is usually about six months out of date.

Gray briefly discusses paratextuality specifically in relation to reality television in *Show Sold Separately*. He claims: "Across reality television, paratexts have frequently

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<sup>24</sup> Jenkins defines convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes depending on who's speaking, and what they think they are talking about" (*Convergence Culture* 2-3).

attempted to make texts more accessible, more welcoming, and hence more popular, but they have also worked to ‘solve,’ or at least gloss over, seemingly inherent problems with the genre” (86). Paratexts of reality content, as I observed earlier in this chapter, function to bring the audience to the content. Some of the pitfalls of reality television, according to Gray, include that reality television is “coded as a waste of time,” that it “frequently [utilizes] a hyperbolic mode of address,” that the genre promotes an “ethos of surveillance,” and that reality television’s paratexts “must assuage the viewers’ potential guilt at being reduced to passive voyeurs of a spectacle” (84-85). Gray’s rationalization for paratexts of reality television as glossing over other problems with the content can be seen in the trailer for the initial season of *16 and Pregnant* which introduces the show as a docu-drama and promotes the educationally driven aspects of the franchise.<sup>25</sup> *16 and Pregnant*, in this initial trailer, is framed as an exposé on the cultural problem of teen pregnancy. The highly dramatized, volatile, and exploitative nature of the actual programming is not emphasized in this short trailer, making *16 and Pregnant* appear to be more of a documentary-inspired series and less like what we have come to expect from reality television, as outlined by Gray above.

Despite this trailer, the less apparent nature of MTV’s programming (exploiting the postfeminist failures of the featured teen mothers) cannot be erased, especially through paratexts of the programs. In the times between TV seasons, paratexts provide the only avenue through which the details of the unfolding events in these teen mothers’ lives are being communicated. Most of the events that gain coverage during these periods

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<sup>25</sup> The *16 and Pregnant* trailer can be found [here](#).

exemplify failures, such as custody battles, drug use, and subsequent pregnancies. Thus, it is through understanding these paratexts as outgrowths, overflow, and proliferations of the franchise's primary texts that MTV's teen mothers are reproduced over and over again as postfeminist failures.

## CELEBRITY CULTURE

In looking at the paratexts of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, I find it useful to consider the featured teen mothers as reality television celebrities. In these more public roles, I find that the actions that signify these girls' continual postfeminist failures come through with even more strength. The eight teen mothers featured on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*<sup>26</sup> have become celebrities in their own right. Not only are they recognized for having appeared on MTV, but, as noted through the opening anecdote of this chapter, the girls have become mainstays in tabloid and gossip press.<sup>27</sup> In many ways, these teen mothers have become "gainfully employed for just being themselves" (Sun). From miscarriages to arrests to sex tape controversies, these teen mothers, and MTV to an extent, play upon and exploit the celebrity status each girl has achieved (some more than others) from being teen mothers in the public eye. Graeme Turner reflects that celebrity is a "symptom of a worrying cultural shift: towards a culture that privileges the momentary, the visual and the sensational over the enduring, the written, and the rational" (4). MTV's featured teen mothers who gain the most paratextual attention do so because of

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<sup>26</sup> The four mothers featured on *Teen Mom 3* are not as prominent as the other eight teen mothers MTV has featured in its various iterations of *Teen Mom*.

<sup>27</sup> The Twitter feed @TeenMomNewsFeed is dedicated to cataloguing the press about these girls. Its sources are mainly [www.teenmomnews.com](http://www.teenmomnews.com) and *The Examiner* ([www.examiner.com](http://www.examiner.com)).

outlandish and sensational behavior; these attention-grabbing stories get more coverage than the advocacy and educational work some of the girls engage in, using their “celebrity” for arguably less exploitative (and profit-seeking) purposes.

In work about reality television more generally, theorists note that the genre is known to “manufacture celebrity out of the everyday” (Kavka *Reality TV* 146). Su Holmes explains that on reality television “‘ordinary’ people are valued and scrutinised for playing themselves” (“When...” 20). In reality television, the premise of the shows is to feature a “cast” of ordinary people (Grindstaff 2011, Kavka 2012, Turner 2004, Weber 2014). MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise aims to show the life of the average teen mother, so the fame these girls gain from being featured on MTV’s series seems as though it is an unavoidable side effect. Yet, many scholars have noted that reality television is a “celebrity-making apparatus” (Kavka 2012, Andrejevic 2004). Graeme Turner asserts in *Understanding Celebrity* that within the genre of reality television, “media producers have taken control of an economy of celebrity by turning it into an outcome of a programming strategy” (54). His discussion centers on *Big Brother* (2000-, UK version), yet his claims can be extrapolated to MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise and the discussions I began in Chapter One about MTV’s profit motive. Turner frames celebrities as “financial assets” who are “developed to make money” (34-35). While MTV may not have anticipated the success of their teen pregnancy franchise, once *16 and Pregnant* gained a sizable audience, the girls who had been featured already, and those who entered the franchise from that point forward, became celebrities, for better and for worse.

What is unique about MTV's franchise is that the distinguishing feature for which the girls are selected, and then gain fame, is their teen pregnancy. This signifier, unlike being picked to live in the *Big Brother* (2000-, CBS) house or to travel the world on *The Amazing Race* (2001-, CBS), is one of negativity, failure, and ruined childhood. For this reason, I find fame that stems from teen pregnancy to be different than that of other iterations of reality television celebrity, and in need of close interrogation. There is more nuance to this particular type of celebrity than merely understanding these young women as what Laura Grindstaff calls "ordinary celebrities" in her analysis of MTV's reality television show *Sorority Life* (2002-2004) (44). MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, and the celebrity it manufactures, is also quite different from a show like *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* (2008-2012, VH1), where the celebrities come onto the show already famous from other endeavors in their lives. The girls in MTV's franchise, particularly on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, become famous through being featured on a reality television show, and for the most part this fame is not fleeting as with other reality television celebrity that continually needs to be renewed, either through the reality television celebrities reinvigorating their public images or for a show like *The Amazing Race* (2001-, CBS) or *American Idol* (2002-, FOX) to introduce a new cast (Gies 353). The relative permanence of this fame can be attributed to the multiple seasons of each show within MTV's franchise and to the more consistent casts, especially in *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*.

The implications of fame originating from postfeminist failure have many ramifications as the girls gain media attention for what MTV is working, through its

programming, to prevent – teen pregnancy. Erin Meyers discusses these teen mothers as celebrities in *Flow*, positing that for the girls “the[ir] private self *is* [their] public self.” This conflation of public and private identity is problematic because it puts the girls’ entire life up for display when teen motherhood is known to create lasting and oftentimes negative effects on a young woman’s life. Lieve Gies discusses celebrity like that outlined by Meyers in terms of commodification, expanding upon my previous discussion of how celebrities are created to be financially lucrative for those who manufacture them. The “teen mother” becomes a commodity that is used (and exploited) by the entity that initiated this process – in this case MTV. The commodification of teen motherhood sets a poor example for young girls who come to see MTV’s featured teen mothers as celebrities and perhaps even role models to look up to (349). While MTV would like to position the teen mothers featured within its franchise, especially on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, as ordinary girls who became pregnant at sixteen, contemporary celebrity culture makes this goal impossible. Grindstaff explains that for her *Sorority Life* informants, “television exposure was an escape from, not an affirmation of, their ordinary status” (45). She continues: “Reality TV is precisely about celebrating ‘ordinary’ people while at the same time offering an escape from that ordinariness via the celebrity frame” (51). The same is the case for MTV’s teen mothers, as the exposure they have gained through MTV’s programs, and continue to garner through paratextual outlets, makes them anything but normal teen mothers.

A discussion of stardom, celebrity, and celebrity culture would be lacking without looking to Richard Dyer’s body of work and how MTV’s teen mothers have become

“stars.” MTV’s teen mothers are not only the people featured in MTV’s teen pregnancy media texts. They are media texts themselves and are “seen as a set of media signs” (Dyer *Heavenly Bodies* ix). Dyer further clarifies that stars (in this case MTV’s teen mothers) are “produced by media industries” and “made for profit” (*Heavenly Bodies* 4, 5). Most of Dyer’s analysis, especially in *Stars*, is rooted in the film industry. Yet, just as Dyer understands the star as an “aspect of film’s ‘industrial’ nature,” this idea can be extrapolated to the television industry (*Stars* 1). MTV uses the teen mothers they feature in their franchise’s programming as means of gaining profit, as I have discussed in Chapter One and earlier in this chapter. MTV’s teen mothers are made into commodities, as noted above, through being featured in the franchise’s programming. Just as stars, according to Dyer, are “vital to the economics of Hollywood” and constitute “a form of capital possessed by [film] studios,” so, too, are MTV’s teen mothers fundamental to the economic success of MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise (*Stars* 10). In this commodification of MTV’s teen mothers, what I understand to be their continual postfeminist failure is also commodified and continually reiterated through the girls’ public personas.

Connecting celebrity and fame to theories of postfeminism and to understanding paratexts of MTV’s franchise as reproducing these girls’ postfeminist failures, fame has overtaken traditional notions that feminine success is epitomized through marriage. In her book *Girl Heroes*, Susan Hopkins discusses this shift through a discussion of what she labels as girl power. She notes: “Fame is replacing romance as the dominant female fantasy” (189). Fame has taken hold as a more contemporary marker of productive womanhood over marriage. Hopkins further explains: “Love and marriage is no longer

the final answer to youthful feminine desire” (191). Celebrity culture reinforces this notion and many of MTV’s teen mothers have achieved and work to maintain their fame. Perhaps the most glaring example of this behavior comes through *Teen Mom*’s Farrah, who has gone to great lengths since *Teen Mom* officially ended to keep her name in tabloid press by intentionally releasing a sex tape, attempting to appear on additional reality television shows, and undergoing multiple cosmetic surgeries. In terms of girls embodying postfeminist failure yet still being famous, Hopkins gets at a similar notion in her analysis of an Australian reality series, *Popstars* (1999-2002). Through editorial decisions, contestants who were featured on this show “found their dreams and disappointments repositioned as public spectacle” (Hopkins 67). Similarly, MTV’s teen mothers, through the shows and prolific paratexts, find their failures, more often than not, re-appropriated as public displays of continual disappointment.

#### **CASE STUDY: DR. DREW’S REUNION SHOWS**

Through Gray’s metaphors of paratexts, the reunion shows at the end of each season of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* can be understood as “outgrowths,” “overflow,” and “proliferations” of the original franchise content. These reunion shows are “outgrowths” because they move away from and allow the featured teen mothers to reflect upon their journey through a given season of the series at hand. In a similar vein, these reunion shows are “overflow” from the series’ content, because they reveal unseen scenes, allow moments shown to viewers to be more clearly contextualized, and include discussions of more recent occurrences than may not have appeared within the edited series. Finally, these reunion shows can be understood as



“proliferations” of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* because they work to change the at-home audience’s understandings of each girl’s postfeminist failures, because they are being seen through Dr. Drew’s patriarchal gaze.

Before analyzing Dr. Drew and the reunion shows as stand-ins for MTV’s normative and patriarchally-driven judgments of teen motherhood through his role as moderator, I first want to look at the history of talk show experts and Dr. Drew’s history in this type of role. These reunion shows are visually and topically designed to mirror that of daytime talk shows. I find these reunion shows, through this structuring, expose the continual failures of MTV’s teen mothers through a variety of tactics directed at the teen mothers themselves and the imagined audience of potentially “at-risk” (of becoming teen mothers) girls. These reunion shows are designed to reaffirm the messages communicated by the series about the overwhelmingly negative and long-term consequences of teen pregnancy. Through this analysis, I hope to offer a grounded discourse analysis of Dr. Drew’s interactions with MTV’s teen mothers.

#### **TALK SHOW EXPERTS AND DR. DREW PINSKY**

Looking in-depth into Dr. Drew’s many advice and reality television-associated endeavors informs his position as the moderator, and adult authority, for MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise, especially on the reunion shows he hosts. Dr. Drew got his start in media in 1984 with *Loveline*, a call-in radio (and then television) program that aims to help youth and young adults with relationship, sexuality, and substance abuse issues. When it was on television, *Loveline* aired on MTV between 1996-2000. Hence, Dr. Drew has a multi-decade relationship with MTV. Additionally, Dr. Drew is featured in VH1’s

*Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* (2008-2012) and its outgrowths, *Sex Rehab with Dr. Drew* (2009) and *Sober House* (2009-2010). His most recent talk show and daytime television undertakings were *Dr. Drew On Call* (2011-) on HLN and *Lifetchangers* (2011-2012) on The CW.<sup>28</sup> As much as Dr. Drew serves as an authoritative figure within MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, it is important to remember that his celebrity and "expertise" is being exploited by MTV as well.

In MTV's teen pregnancy franchise's reunion specials, *16 and Pregnant's* "Life After Labor" and *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2's* "Finale Special: A Check Up with Dr. Drew," Dr. Drew serves as an "expert," a role in talk show programming that Jane Shattuc discusses in her book *The Talking Cure*: "Expert is a nomination that the program assigns to an individual based on an advanced degree, a publication, or a position with an institution. ... Talk shows use experts to assert control and define acceptable behavior" (101). Dr. Drew lends his expertise, and sometimes his judgment as well, about the decisions these teen mothers have and continue to make. As an expert, Dr. Drew is able to be a voice of authority over and for the teen mothers. Through his words in these reunion specials, MTV defines "acceptable" sexual behavior for teen girls, which, in the case of these cautionary tales, is abstinence or, at the very least, engaging in safe sexual practices.

Although Shattuc looks specifically at women's daytime television as her object of study, her analysis of talk show experts informs my study of MTV's reunion shows and the use of Dr. Drew as the expert and host. The culture that Shattuc challenges in her

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<sup>28</sup> This information was gathered from *Loveline* website, [here](#).

analysis of women's daytime television talk shows is similar to that which I see producing the way the teen mothers are treated by Dr. Drew and more broadly in popular culture. Shattuc discusses the historical lineage of talk show experts: "The expert descends from the early tabloid's women's page and advice columns. Today's expert is usually a woman with an advanced degree in psychology or a health-related field" (26). What is unique about Dr. Drew, in light of Shattuc's analysis, is that he is male. What would the reunion shows be like if they were moderated by a female expert? Would the same sense of judgment of the teen mothers and exposure of their postfeminist failures and poor decision-making persist with a female moderator at the helm? As a male moderator, Dr. Drew is able to act as a spokesperson for patriarchal values regarding teen pregnancy. His judgment and shaming of MTV's featured teen mothers in the reunion shows reflects the larger negative cultural attitude toward young motherhood that I explain in my Introduction. Additionally, because he is male, he has the authority to criticize the teen mothers' lives as well as the behavior of their male partners, the fathers of their children.

Shattuc addresses the use of expertise as an indicator of trustworthiness and authority on talk shows: "The expert's status derives from advanced education and/or specialized occupation, often within the health-care industries ... Consider the continual tagging of 'Ph.D' after the expert's name in an attempt to deflect questions of credibility away from someone who possesses 'knowledge' on a subject on which we know little or nothing" (7). Dr. Drew may not seem like the most fitting moderator for a show about teen pregnancy, given that he is much better known at the contemporary moment for his

addiction-related medical expertise than for *Loveline*. Yet, he is a physician, and with that distinction, according to Shattuc, comes the assumption that he is equipped to moderate discussions about reproductive health. Additionally, he is a doctor who is known to openly comment on many celebrities who have become “at-risk” through drug use or other tabloid scandals. Clare Daniel, in her analysis of Dr. Drew’s role in MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise, goes as far to label Dr. Drew as the “moral and psychological authority of the series” (86). Dr. Drew has quite the resume as a “talk show expert” when it comes to addiction, but his work has also focused on young adults’ sexuality, and his background with *Loveline* and MTV contribute to his expertise and authority as the moderator of the teen pregnancy franchise’s reunion shows.

#### **DISCOURSES OF PREVENTION**

While paratexts like Dr. Drew’s reunion specials reproduce the discourses of teen girls’ deviant sexuality first asserted in MTV’s teen franchise’s original series, the mode of address Dr. Drew employs differs drastically from that of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*. The reunion shows follow a question/answer format that Amanda Rossie describes as a “therapeutic talk-show model” that is used as a rehabilitation strategy to “explain away white teenage pregnancies” (115). Reflecting theories of postfeminism, this address, as Rossie observes, is enacted through “Dr. Drew [placing] individual responsibility over institutional failure” (116). Each teen mother faces Dr. Drew’s questions individually before coming together with the other women at the end of the reunion show, and each of Dr. Drew’s questions point to individual struggles,

failures, and triumphs rather than collective ones across the many storylines traced in MTV's teen pregnancy programming.

The discourse of prevention remains the central message from the franchise to its viewers, but Dr. Drew's much more explicit address of this issue changes how this prevention message is perceived by the audience and how the teen mothers respond to it. This adjustment in mode of address, and thus how the prevention message is both communicated and understood, is an example of how paratexts, when considered to be proliferations, can contribute to new interpretations and meanings derived from a given text. While in *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*, messages of pregnancy prevention come predominantly through the narrative of each girl's individual life,<sup>29</sup> in the reunion shows these messages are overtly stated and discussed. The reunion shows provide "surface-level reflection," but more impactfully pathologize the teen mothers in a more pronounced way than the shows themselves do; the postfeminist failures are embedded within the shows' narrative while these failures are addressed head-on in the reunion shows (Guglielmo and Stewart 31). As Martina Thomas explains, "the use of Dr. Drew as a counseling expert helping these single teen mothers adds to the rhetoric of pathology often associated with a lack of heteronormative ideals" (119).

Dr. Drew, as moderator of these reunion shows, employs a strategy of stating decontextualized statistics about teen pregnancy and relentlessly questioning of the teen mothers in order to make his prevention message clear. He does not name the sources of

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<sup>29</sup> PSA spots between segments and commercial breaks naming [www.itsyoursexlife.org](http://www.itsyoursexlife.org) as a resource for "taking control of your sex life" are also present in *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*.

these statistics, but from my analysis in Chapter One, I have found that they are the same statistics used by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Dr. Drew is able to use these statistics as powerful tools to guide discussions and scare the at-home audience, even though he does not cite their sources. On the reunion shows it is clear that Dr. Drew is the one with the knowledge, the expertise, and hence the power. He asks the questions of the teen mothers and he guides each discussion with them, all from his “traditional talk show host chair” (Guglielmo and Stewart 31). The statistics Dr. Drew cites are overwhelmingly negative, and thus pathologizing:

- *Less than half of teen mothers graduate from high school. Less than 2% of teen moms graduate from college by age 30.*
- *Nearly 3 in 10 girls will get pregnant at least once before age 20.*
- *Children born to teen mothers are more likely to drop out of high school, suffer abuse and neglect, and grow up poor.*
- *1 out of 4 teen mothers get pregnant again within 2 years.*

These statistics focus on the lasting effects of teen pregnancy and illustrate how a teen pregnancy changes the entire trajectory of a young woman’s life. The facts quite clearly support the notion of teen mothers as being postfeminist failures, unable to maintain their previous lifestyles or finish their education, for example. Dr. Drew, in using these statistics, communicates to the audience of girls who are susceptible to this fate that teen pregnancy is something to be avoided at all costs. Similarly, Dr. Drew’s questions center, in terms of pregnancy prevention, on the use of contraceptives. These questions are often invasive, as Dr. Drew asks each girl what they are using for birth control, if they are using their chosen method properly, and what they do if they engage in unprotected sex. In the *Teen Mom 2* Season 4 reunion special, Chelsea admitted to engaging in

unprotected sex with her ex-boyfriend, and Dr. Drew went as far as to ask her why she did not take Plan-B (emergency contraception) (Season 4, Part 2).

If there is one take-away from the reunion shows, it is that “teen pregnancy is 100% preventable.” Dr. Drew repeats this statement over and over again, reminding the teen mothers (and the at-home audience) that sex is a risky behavior and suggests that, if these teen mothers are sexually active, they should be having *safe* sex. Yet, this messaging occurs more in the transitions between conversations with each individual teen mother and is less present in the actual dialogue that Dr. Drew has with them and their loved ones. All the information Dr. Drew provides about contraceptives and safe sex predominantly plugs external websites that come before or after commercial breaks in bumpers like the one pictured or verbally:



Illustration 5: IYSL Bumper.  
Source/Copyright: MTV.com (Author Screenshot)

Additionally, the statistics Dr. Drew provides are stated in these same moments, most often used as introductions to each girl before Dr. Drew talks to her one-on-one.

Just as in the texts of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*, drama centering on the teen mother is at the forefront in the reunion shows. Dr. Drew holds these teen mothers accountable for their actions during the preceding season and “checks up” on them – ensuring that they are using contraceptives properly and every time they have sex, as well as taking positive steps forward in their lives. Through these questions and what constitutes Dr. Drew’s “check-up,” it is clear that pregnancy prevention is a key discourse in these reunion shows. Yet, the message of prevention extends beyond Dr. Drew or MTV’s franchise as well, as the programs (and, by extension, the paratexts) are “lauded by some as a worthy educational tool, a conversation-starter for teenagers and their parents” (Seltzer B03). Hence, the discourse of prevention stated implicitly in MTV’s shows and more explicitly in paratexts, like Dr. Drew’s reunion specials, is not meant to be the end of discourse or to replace the interpersonal conversations between teens and their parents; they are intended more as supplements to these important conversations that must happen before the “at-risk” girls in the imagined at-home audience get pregnant themselves.

#### **DR. DREW AS THERAPIST AND THE FOCUS ON DYSFUNCTION**

Dr. Drew is hard on the teen mothers in the reunion specials and makes them relive, and justify, difficult decisions they have faced. In the process, he reinforces their “at-risk” girl status and the actions that indicate their postfeminist failures. As Laurie Ouellette argues, in addition to being scrutinized by the public, MTV’s featured teen mothers are also judged by Dr. Drew: “The subjects are ... monitored by Dr. Drew, who does not treat them in real life but observes their lives through the reality programs and



appears on every finale to help them publically ‘process’ their experience and dispense therapeutic advice” (“It’s Not...” 248). This “therapy” by Dr. Drew is the premise of the reunion shows. For example, in *Teen Mom 2*’s Season 3 reunion special, Leah and Dr. Drew have a hard conversation about her story during that season, which included a divorce from the father of her twins and a miscarriage with her new boyfriend (now husband). As framed by Dr. Drew, Leah, at this point in time, is “grabbing for a fantasy” of a family that no longer exists because she cheated on her husband (*Teen Mom 2*, Season 3). Dr. Drew pushes Leah to set boundaries with the two men in her life and to go to therapy, while also noting that pregnancies do not fix problems (in reaction to her miscarriage). This conversation is hard for Leah, as the audience sees her in tears while discussing these very intimate, and somewhat tragic, details of her life. She almost appears as a victim of Dr. Drew, as he makes an example of her mistakes to support the cautionary tale he aims to communicate about the perilous outcomes of getting pregnant as a teen.

These therapeutically-informed conversations take up the most time during these specials, as Dr. Drew spends much more time talking to each teen mother and her loved ones than talking to the teen mothers as a group or involving the children. In nearly every conversation during all the seasons, each teen mother is quickly brought to tears, usually upon watching a recap of their season. Then, Dr. Drew lends his “expert” opinion to the situation at hand, like he did for Leah as explained above. But for Catelynn and Tyler, who put their baby Carly up for adoption, their experience interacting with Dr. Drew differs from Leah’s. Their appearance in each reunion, from *16 and Pregnant* through

*Teen Mom*, Season 4, causes them to relive, reflect upon, and re-justify that adoption was the right choice for them. Nonetheless, Dr. Drew commends them for their “brave decision,” and Catelynn, over the seasons, develops a penchant for counseling and sets herself on a career path to become an adoption counselor. Catelynn sees the impact of her story on girls who reach out to her when making the same decision about adoption. Yet, because adoption is “a decision strongly endorsed by Dr. Drew,” the focus of Drew’s questioning is more centered on the continued dysfunction in Catelynn and Tyler’s lives – their conflict with their parents, Tyler’s father’s countless trips to jail, and Catelynn’s mother’s constant verbal abuse, which even happens on camera in front of Dr. Drew during the *Teen Mom* Season 2 reunion special (Ouellette “It’s Not... 249).

The focus on dysfunction in these teen mothers’ lives is also present in the reunion specials through discussions surrounding issues of domestic violence with Jenelle, Amber, and Markai and issues of loss and grief for Kristina and Farrah, who lost the fathers of their children in car accidents. Dr. Drew probes these issues and directs the audience, and the teen mothers, to online resources – [loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org) and [halfofus.com](http://halfofus.com) respectively.<sup>30</sup> These issues, as framed by Dr. Drew, are not unique to these girls, but rather are a part of what becomes a much more complicated way of life once a girl becomes a teen mother. With Amber, Dr. Drew’s intervention is quite intense, as he states that Amber’s violent and abusive behavior shown on *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen*

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<sup>30</sup> [www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org) is website with resources focused specifically on dating abuse that is a collaboration of Break the Cycle, a youth empowerment organization dedicated to ending domestic violence, and The National Dating Abuse Helpline. Similarly [www.halfofus.com](http://www.halfofus.com) provides resources about mental illnesses as they pertain to young people ranging from depression to addiction and is a collaborative effort between mtvU and The Jed Foundation.

*Mom* “has to stop,” and counsels Gary, the father of Amber’s child, to set up consequences for Amber’s behavior when it becomes extreme, such as calling the police.

Yet, Dr. Drew’s judgment of these teen mothers’ life choices is not always centered on such devastating experiences as domestic violence or loss and grief. For example, in Season 3 of *Teen Mom*, Maci expresses the desire to have another child. In the reunion special at the end of the season, Dr. Drew does not hold back his contempt for Maci’s desire to add to her family, as Maci is presented as finally getting on track with her college studies. Dr. Drew asks Maci, quite condescendingly, “What’s the matter with you?” In the subsequent conversation between Maci and Dr. Drew, it becomes clear, through Drew’s probing and overt judgment, that although Maci would *like* to have another child, she has no intention or plans to act on that desire or the feeling that she is in “mommy mode.” Her desires are immediately dissuaded and judged quite harshly by Dr. Drew. According to Maci (but no doubt influenced by Dr. Drew’s judgments), the next child Maci has will be planned. Maci clearly states that at the current moment, she has no plans to become pregnant again without being married first, adhering as much as she can to her “can-do” attitude despite being a teen mother.

#### **[AT-HOME] AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT**

Unlike MTV’s teen pregnancy shows, in the reunion specials Dr. Drew turns his address to the audience, most specifically those viewers who watch from the comfort of their own homes. There is an in-house audience who ask very few questions at the end of selected reunion specials. After the first seasons of *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*, MTV seemed to abandon this form of audience engagement. In the instances when these

questions were posed to the teen mothers, the segment took place in the last five minutes of each special alongside the girls asking each other questions, the babies making their appearance for the audience, and Dr. Drew noting one last time the importance of pregnancy prevention. Notably, audience questions did return in the Season Four reunion special for *Teen Mom 2*, but instead of being asked by audience members, they were gathered through social media and posed by Dr. Drew, and still were being posed in the final minutes of the special. These questions included:

“From watching the show I have noticed that most of you chose not to breastfeed your babies and I just wondering how you came to that decision.” (*16 and Pregnant*, Season One)

“My question is now that you guys have had children, what messages would you possibly like to teach them in the future about teenage pregnancy, contraception, and relationships?” (*16 and Pregnant*, Season One)

“What’s the craziest moment the cameras didn’t get to see?” (*Teen Mom*, Season One)

“What do you feel is the biggest sacrifice you have had to make?” (*Teen Mom*, Season One)

“Kailyn, what do you do to relieve the stress of being a teen mom?” (*Teen Mom 2*, Season Four)

“Leah, how does the divorce affect you? Do you still love Corey?” (*Teen Mom 2*, Season Four)

“Chelsea, do you want your daughter to grow up and be into men like her dad or learn from your mistakes?” (*Teen Mom 2*, Season Four)

“What was the most difficult part of being on *Teen Mom*?” (*Teen Mom 2*, Season Four)

In addition to being given little airtime, these questions are often quite shallow, extremely personalized in nature, or too complex to be able to be fully addressed in just a minute or two. The teen mothers who answer these questions typically do so in about a sentence.

Due to these factors and the seemingly marginal nature of these questions, the audience address and engagement I analyze in this chapter is witnessed more through Dr. Drew’s cognizance of and address to the at-home audience. This takes place through his

continual assertion that “teen pregnancy is 100% preventable”; his connections to information about contraceptives on [www.itsyoursexlife.org](http://www.itsyoursexlife.org), [www.bedsider.com](http://www.bedsider.com), and each show’s website; and his proclamation that “knowledge is control” and that viewers should take control of their sex lives by getting informed. Like Dr. Drew’s conversations with each teen mother in these reunion specials, which happen individually and focus on individual (postfeminist) failures, Dr. Drew’s audience address is not to a collective imagined audience, but rather to each individual viewer. This address is highly personalized, as the plugs to [www.itsyoursexlife.org](http://www.itsyoursexlife.org) state “take control of *your* sex life” (emphasis added). This individualized messaging reflects the individualism central to postfeminist discourses, notions of postfeminist failure I have addressed throughout this thesis, and consumer culture more generally with its interpellating address. It also makes the focus of the reunion shows more about staving off the potential postfeminist failures of the individualized female audience members than that of the teen mothers on stage. As framed by Dr. Drew (and presumably by MTV as well), the female audience members are those who potentially need the messages and information about pregnancy prevention more than the featured teen mothers. The educational address of the reunion shows, and the franchise more generally as discussed in Chapter One, is directed to the “at-risk” audience. MTV seems to suggest that the audience for its teen pregnancy franchise embodies the potential for change and for teen pregnancy rates to decline in the United States.

Therefore, the teen mothers in the reunion specials are used as additional tools to help communicate to viewers the rhetoric that Dr. Drew asserts about prevention and the

consequences of teen pregnancy. The onus on the female audience members is reflected in Dr. Drew's address of each teen mother, as the audience is supposed to be learning from and not replicating the featured teen mothers' mistakes. The teen mothers are what Dr. Drew calls "relatable resources" for the female audience, but not role models for them. Yet, some of the teen mothers, including Catelynn and Maci, have used the fame they have gained from being featured on MTV to advocate for teens to engage in safe sex if they are sexually active, so they may be exceptions to my prior claim.

Ever present in the rhetoric espoused by Dr. Drew, supported by the teen mothers, and heard by the shows' at-home audience is the notion that becoming "at-risk" is an ever-present possibility during female adolescence. The reunion specials thus serve a function as being part of this prevention strategy, especially for the at-home audience, both by propelling more conversations that can work to combat teen pregnancy and reminding the at-home audience of the real and lived consequences of teen pregnancy by the mothers featured on MTV.

## CONCLUSION

MTV's franchise would likely not be as successful as it has been without the paratexts that contribute to the franchise's popularity and the spectacle of its celebrity teen mothers. MTV's teen mothers, unlike those young adults featured on MTV's *Made* (2003-2013) or *My Super Sweet Sixteen* (2005-2008), have gained a level of celebrity that renders them recognizable to a wide range of people who may not have watched *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, or *Teen Mom 2*. The paratexts, as outgrowths, overflow, and

proliferations of MTV's franchised series, work to continually sustain interest in the lives of MTV's teen mothers.

Not only do these paratexts maintain attention on MTV's featured teen mothers, but they also work to perpetuate these young women as postfeminist failures. This sense of failure, first established on *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* is reproduced, over and over again, through the extra-textual material that circulates within MTV's franchise and about the women featured on the shows. The reunion specials, hosted by Dr. Drew, exemplify this idea of the reproduction of these girls' postfeminist failures, as Dr. Drew takes on a patriarchal stance in relation to the girls and calls out their failures quite explicitly in front of both the live studio and the at-home audience.

Between MTV's shows and their paratexts, especially tabloids and gossip media, the hype surrounding these teen moms has created a relatively consistent spectacle around them, especially for Jenelle, Farrah, and Amber. Fans want to know what the girls are doing, if they are pregnant again, what trouble they are getting into, and more. Especially on the reunion specials, but also more generally across other paratextual material, the potential for or actual focus on the *successes* of MTV's teen mothers are largely overlooked, just as I found in the original series. It is these girls' inability to successfully navigate adolescent sexuality that created their personas as teen mothers in the first place. Thus, scandal more than success seems to follow them through their publically broadcasted lives. The broader audience for this paratextual material, and the franchise's series as well, have regularly been exposed to seeing these girls through their

shortcomings, and hence that is what MTV and broader popular media continue to produce.

I find the spectacle of failure created around MTV's teen pregnancy franchise and the teen mothers who are featured within it to be extremely problematic. For example, while the reunion specials may circulate information about contraceptives to at-home audience members who may otherwise not have access to such information, this positive aim does not negate the means by which MTV disseminates these sources of knowledge. Dr. Drew, in many ways, humiliates the teen mothers featured in MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, dissecting their shortcomings, failures, and poor decision-making practices. Yet, these teen mothers agree to be featured on MTV's shows and thus are complicit in the representations of themselves by MTV by allowing the cameras into their lives and continuing to participate in its programs.



## CONCLUSION

This project has been challenging to conduct at times because MTV's teen pregnancy franchise has and continues to change, evolve, and grow. Although *Teen Mom* ended in 2012 and *Teen Mom 3* was cancelled after its first season aired in 2013, *Teen Mom 2* aired new episodes in early 2014 (though the content was about a year old by the time it did hit the airwaves) and *16 and Pregnant* just began airing its fifth season in April 2014. The demand for new content related to this franchise remains strong, as its shows are some of MTV's most highly rated programs ever behind *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012) (Ng).

MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, which has been active for over four years, continues to morph, expand, and adjust according to the demands of the cable network and the network's viewers. This outward-moving trajectory, discussed in Chapter Three's analysis of paratexts, applies both to the franchise's content that is directly produced by MTV and more generally to how the franchise has been and continues to be understood within popular culture. The franchise has expanded beyond the clear-cut and edited seasons of content produced by MTV, extending into popular and gossip press and varied parts of the Internet (specifically Twitter). Such new outlets provide a means for MTV's featured teen mothers to publicize their lives and/or have their lives publically documented, often more linked to "real time" developments.

Before MTV decided to air the out-of-date fifth season of *Teen Mom 2* in early 2014, it appeared that the franchise might be coming to a close. Many factors contributed to this assumption, including most notably a sex tape released by *Teen Mom*'s Farrah and

*Teen Mom 2* Jenelle's first arrest related to heroin possession. Both of these events happened within a week of each other in April 2013, and began to raise questions over whether the fame these girls initially gained by appearing on MTV's shows might be detrimental and setting a poor example for MTV's audience of impressionable youth. Yet, the shows, when on the air, maintain high ratings and are flagship programs for the network, creating an incentive for MTV to keep them on the airwaves. At this time it is hard to foresee the future of this franchise, yet the new season of *16 and Pregnant* may signal a franchise revival. My hope is that this teen pregnancy franchise will continue to be explored in scholarly forums as it endures, grows, and remains present in the MTV line-up, and even after it is cancelled.

#### **MTV'S MINIMAL ADDRESS OF ABORTION**

Despite this franchise's growth, one glaring absence within MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, both in its texts and paratexts, is an extended conversation focusing on abortion. It is critical to remember that, unlike what MTV depicts the majority of the time, when a teenage girl finds out that she is pregnant, she has three options moving forward. She can carry the child to term and keep the baby, she can carry the child to term and then put the baby up for adoption, or she can terminate the pregnancy. Within MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, the first two options are part of its pointed conversation about teen pregnancy. Abortion, however, is almost always left out of the picture. Because of this fact, one can argue that MTV is not showing the full "reality of teen pregnancy" as they claim to do. Twenty-seven percent of teen pregnancies are

terminated, and over time MTV has been criticized for not including those stories within their franchise of teen pregnancy programs (Fisher).

I believe that the lack of inclusion of abortion storylines is a strategic move by MTV in collaboration with its partners The Kaiser Family Foundation and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Neither of the non-profit organizations takes an overt stance on abortion in its public materials. Additionally, MTV, in focusing a franchise of programming on the already controversial social issue of teen pregnancy, opens itself to criticisms from many sides – from pro-abstinence coalitions to pro-life activists to pro-choice proponents. Hence, I see the choice to not emphasize abortion in the storylines across the franchise as part of MTV's effort to remain as apolitical as possible given the already politicized subject matter the programs address. Yet, this approach is problematic because teen pregnancy is a highly politicized topic and only a partial perspective is presented by MTV and in extra-textual discourse around the network's teen pregnancy franchise. Over time, MTV has become (perhaps through pressure from critics) only slightly more open to at least mentioning abortion, as I discuss below. JoAnne Gordon, who discusses MTV's teen pregnancy franchise and abortion, points out that "abortion remains one of the most regulated elements of health care" and that "the current political climate of hostility and regressive federal and state policies against women's reproductive rights in the United States" likely contributes to MTV's minimal address of the controversial topic (180, 179). Aside from the political dimension of abortion, I believe that MTV evades discussions of abortion because they would undercut the entire premise of what the programming is marketed as. In other

words, the series would not be able to show the harsh realities of teen motherhood if it did not show a teen mother who carries her child to term. Thus, it makes sense that girls who choose abortion are not featured within this franchise's programming, especially on *16 and Pregnant*.

The few instances when abortion is discussed by the network and its partners are especially illuminating in light of my argument that MTV produces and exploits the girls they feature as postfeminist failures. Choosing to obtain an abortion allows for a mostly-uninterrupted teenage life.<sup>31</sup> This choice allows for affordances like an unhalted education, an uninterrupted high school (and even college) experience, and less financial strain on the teenage girl. These markers of average teenage life draw upon the "can-do" girl discourses I have engaged throughout this thesis. If MTV were to feature a girl who did obtain an abortion on *16 and Pregnant*, the first "failure" – unplanned pregnancy – would be resolved. This would leave no narrative arc in which further failures could constitute a storyline comparable to the ones that adhere to the narrative structure of *16 and Pregnant* that I outlined in Chapter Two. Hence, it is not surprising that all of the instances where abortion is discussed in any depth are either on *Teen Mom* or *Teen Mom 2* or as secondary narratives on *16 and Pregnant*.

Most recently abortion was discussed in the Season Five premiere of *Teen Mom 2*, which aired on January 22, 2014. In this episode, Jenelle finds out that she is pregnant with her second child. At the time, she is in a relatively unstable place in her life because

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<sup>31</sup> I qualify this statement in order to not discount or trivialize the very traumatic emotional reactions that can accompany the decision to have an abortion.

she is newly sober (from marijuana and heroin) and is facing felony charges for heroin possession. Her ex-boyfriend, who got her pregnant, is in jail. Struggling with sobriety, Jenelle is not in school, nor does she have a job. She is living with her mother, who still has custody of her son Jace. Jenelle discusses her predicament with a friend: “I know it would be selfish to Jace if I had another child ... I am going to get an abortion” (5.1). Jenelle’s mother supports what she calls a “wise decision” to abort. Yet, over the course of the episode, the abortion occurs, but is not narratively explored. Instead, the abortion and its aftermath are overshadowed by discussions that Jenelle needs to get her life on track and avoid a felony charge at all costs. This roadblock for Jenelle, the unplanned pregnancy, is discussed in this episode but is minimized textually because the decision to abort is already made.

Jenelle’s abortion on *Teen Mom 2* does not mark the first time MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise has acknowledge the topic of abortion. In February 2010, in reaction to MTV’s overwhelming silence regarding abortion, active feminist Jessica Valenti spoke about the elision of abortion in MTV’s teen pregnancy programming. She questions:

Why are some teen pregnancies worth covering while others aren’t? There is more than one kind of pregnant teen; even if a teenager decides to have an abortion she was still pregnant, her story is still important, and her decision is worth talking about. This absence of teens who choose abortion in *16 and Pregnant* feels like a dismissal of so many young women’s experiences. (Echevarria, Gordon 186)

Perhaps in reaction to many criticisms along these same lines, MTV responded with a one-time special about abortion. Airing during the holiday season on December 28, 2010, *No Easy Decision* addresses the controversial topic of abortion in a forthright manner.

Yet, the special aired at 11:30pm EST (the normal time slot for the teen pregnancy programs is 10pm EST) and was limited to thirty minutes. JoAnne Gordon notes in her chapter about this special in Guglielmo's edited collection that "MTV had no intention to promote the show," as the time the network chose to air the special is "when most shows usually air reruns due to the holiday season" (168). This special can be found using Google searches and viewed on MTV's website, but it is not linked on any of the franchise's other numerous webpages hosted on MTV.com.

*No Easy Decision* focuses on the experience of Markai Durham, an African American girl first featured on *16 and Pregnant*. While Markai is African American, this abortion special positions her much like the franchise more generally views its teen mothers through the lens of teen pregnancy as a white, middle class issue, with race and class being largely erased. Unlike *16 and Pregnant*, which aims to shape the young female audience's behavior by advocating for pregnancy prevention, Gordon notes that "Markai's experience with abortion [is] framed as her personal story, not a caricature of how a woman *should* act" (188). When Markai becomes pregnant again, within a year of her first pregnancy, she invites MTV's cameras to follow her decision-making process, and ultimately decides that abortion is the right decision for her, her boyfriend James, and their young daughter for whom they can barely provide. The first seventeen minutes of the thirty-minute special follow Markai as she discusses her options with James, a close female friend, and her mother. Markai is adamant that she does not want her daughter "to struggle for her mistake." The special even films Markai as she calls an abortion clinic to find out about medical and surgical abortions with the support of her close friend. It is

clear that the aim of this special is to show the emotional complexity that comes with the decision to have an abortion (Echevarria).

The second section of the special is moderated by Dr. Drew and includes a discussion between him, Markai, and two other (white) young women, not featured in MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, who chose abortion as teenagers. Dr. Drew is quick to address that abortion is a polarizing option and cannot be shown on a special such as *No Easy Decision* in a way that will please everyone. Yet, Dr. Drew is quite non-judgmental in this special, unlike in the reunion shows I discuss in Chapter Three. Instead of the chastising and patriarchal tone he adopts in the reunion specials, Dr. Drew is there in *No Easy Decision* to "offer both a medical and societal context" for abortion (Carmon). Yet, like the rest of MTV's programs, it appears that many of the conversations within *No Easy Decision* are contrived or staged (Carmon, Melas). The special also seems rushed and highly edited (Melas). Despite these criticisms, Lynn Harris of *Salon* was pleased with the special, noting that "[MTV] told the many-sided truth: that abortion is safe and common, that abortion has been made difficult to get, and, most importantly, that abortion is a complex decision made by complex human beings" (Carmon).

Since this special aired over three years ago, MTV has made no similar attempt to honestly show the experience of abortion for teenage girls who face unplanned pregnancies. In *Teen Mom 3*, Briana's experience with her sister getting an abortion right around the time she got pregnant seemed to present a less polarizing way to show the everyday hardship and emotional toll of abortion. Yet, *Teen Mom 3* was cancelled after one season and, with its termination, Briana's storyline left its public forum on MTV. As

the franchise continues to grow, either through new seasons of *16 and Pregnant* or subsequent seasons of *Teen Mom 2*, I wonder if and how the issue of abortion will (or will not) be addressed by MTV. Dr. Drew did highlight Jenelle's abortion in the Season Five reunion show of *Teen Mom 2*. Beyond that abbreviated discussion, will MTV take any action to break from its overwhelming silence regarding abortion, even though, as the girls on *No Easy Decision* emphasize, abortion is a parenting decision?

### **RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS**

In addition to contributing to the growing body of scholarship on MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, I see my thesis project as engaging in and expanding on scholarly discourses about broader topics, such as teenage girlhood, reality television as educational content, and theories of postfeminism. The prior scholarly work on this franchise, which I reviewed in my Introduction, mostly engages small pieces of MTV's teen pregnancy programming or the issues surrounding them in short book chapters or online think pieces. The length and depth I have been able to engage in this project, as well as its multiple methodological approaches, bring much of this scholarship together and builds upon its foundation. By looking at discourses surrounding the franchise alongside the actual content produced by MTV, my work is different from any of the other scholarship I have found that focuses on this franchise. Additionally, in looking at the continual postfeminist failures of the girls featured within MTV's teen pregnancy programming, my analysis engages with many facets of identity, age, and gender within the context of a genre that is often dismissed or denigrated for its exploitation of its subjects, its mindless entertainment value, and its lowbrow cultural status.



As discussed throughout this thesis, studying teenage girlhood is particularly challenging, as the social status of the “teenager” exists in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood. By engaging Anita Harris’ scholarship and applying the concepts of the “can-do” and “at-risk” girl to MTV’s teen mothers, my work demystifies some of the assumptions surrounding both teen motherhood and being a teenager more generally. This contribution goes hand-in-hand with how I see my thesis as contributing to discussions of postfeminist thought, as these theories are commonly ascribed to adult women. By positioning MTV’s teen mothers as postfeminist failures, my work complicates notions of how ideals of postfeminist womanhood are experienced and how postfeminist subjectivity extends beyond adult females.

In addition, this project engages with the question of how reality television can be understood as simultaneously commercial and educational content. While many scholars, journalists, and critics would like to neatly fit MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise into one of the two categorizations, I imagine these seemingly opposed classifications as working together and in tension with each other to help break down how this franchise functions on an industrial level and in relation to other entertainment education initiatives, sponsored by Viacom or others. Additionally, in tracing MTV’s partnerships for their teen pregnancy programming alongside the two non-profits they have affiliated with, my analysis is able to challenge prior monolithic interpretations of discourses espoused by MTV through their storytelling. Each non-profit has a stake in the programming and its messaging, influencing the educational content within the franchise’s programs and extending it into the online world as well.

## LIMITATIONS

Though I am pleased with the breadth of analysis I have been able to conduct in this thesis, there are many topics related to MTV's teen pregnancy franchise that I have been unable to include in this particular project. These include looking at the racial and class-oriented proportions of teen pregnancy as represented by MTV's franchise versus statistics of those rates in the United States, undertaking a more extensive analysis of celebrity culture and MTV's featured teen mothers' participation in the tabloid and gossip industries, and examining the teen mothers in this franchise who exemplify "can-do" girlhood and success, despite their teen pregnancies. I am pleased that I began my analyses of MTV's teen pregnancy franchise through shorter projects earlier in my Master's coursework. This helped me hone in on my foundational perspective that this franchise constructs and reproduces the girls featured as postfeminist failures. Yet, the decision to focus my analysis on this larger concept and its related research questions narrowed the scope of my analysis quite a bit. Many times during the course of this project I had to remind myself that I could not talk about everything related to this franchise and needed to re-calibrate my work to directly engage my research questions and objectives for this specific project.

Another challenge with this thesis is that it focuses on a very sensitive and polarizing social issue. As a result, I consciously avoided many of the divisive aspects of teen pregnancy by exploring MTV's stance and attitude toward it, rather than broader cultural understandings surrounding teen pregnancy. Through discourse analysis of this very specific set of shows and the conversations surrounding them, this project is more

about reflecting upon and critiquing the way in which MTV imagines and portrays teen pregnancy in partnership with its non-profit programming partners.

While I very decidedly focused my analysis on MTV's teen pregnancy franchise, but in doing so I have not positioned myself to be able to analyze how discourses of teen pregnancy, adolescent sexuality, and pregnancy prevention are enacted in other televisual content, whether in other reality shows or in fictional content. Unlike Ouellette who engaged multiple teen pregnancy-oriented reality programs in her analysis in *Reality Gendervision*, I chose to focus on MTV's only, as this set of programs is quite unique, extensive, and culturally recognized. Yet, MTV's teen pregnancy franchise is not the only outlet dealing with teen pregnancy in a substantive way and my analysis could be enriched by placing MTV's franchise in dialogue with other shows that focus on teen pregnancy or include teen pregnancy story arcs such as *Awkward*. (2011-, MTV), *Glee* (2009-, FOX), and *Parenthood* (2010-, NBC).

Additionally, because of limitations of scope and time, I have not focused on the reception of MTV's franchise in this thesis. I approach reception and audience analysis in Chapter Three when I look at Dr. Drew and the franchise's reunion shows, but even then I rely on how the audience is constructed by MTV and addressed by Dr. Drew more than looking at attitudes and behaviors of actual viewers of this franchise's content. In the future, if I continue this research, I would like to engage reception studies and empirical audience analysis more extensively by interviewing teen mothers and viewers of MTV's programming. Additionally, to augment my analysis in Chapter One, I would imagine that it would be useful to talk to people who work behind-the-scenes for MTV, as editors,

camera crews, creative and development personnel, and marketing teams as well as people at Viacom and both non-profits that partnered with MTV's teen pregnancy programming. These interviews would enhance the discourse analysis I have employed and add more nuance, and perhaps *reality*, to my research.

#### **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Research on MTV's teen pregnancy franchise is limited, as outlined in the Introduction to this thesis. Thus, the potential for future research on this franchise, the shows themselves, and the teen mothers featured by MTV is plentiful. I chose to focus my thesis on this franchise because it was unlike other content I saw, both in terms of the genre of reality television and in terms of content that was airing concurrently on MTV. While the research that has been done on the franchise thus far, particularly in the edited collection compiled by Letizia Guglielmo and in Ouellette's chapter in *Reality Gendervision*, were very helpful in guiding my own research questions, I feel that there is much more left to be analyzed.

As I discussed in Chapter One, very little research has been done on philanthropically informed reality television. The partnerships between MTV with The Kaiser Family Foundation's "It's Your (Sex) Life Campaign" and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy are, as far as I could trace, unprecedented for anything more than a story arc in largely narrative television shows or one-time specials like *No Easy Decision* discussed above. This franchise alters the landscape of both reality television and entertainment education, and popular and critical discourse needs to acknowledge this changes more fully. I hope that future research on

this franchise continues to engage the dual objectives of this programming as I have done in this thesis – understanding the shows simultaneously as entertaining, and often exploitative, reality television while at the same time acknowledging that they work as pedagogical programming. When these two understandings are separated from each other it is easy to fall back on common criticisms and affirmations about the shows. These criticisms include arguments that this franchise glamorizes teen pregnancy and that these shows are helping young teens (more often than not girls) take control of their sexual health by providing information about contraceptives and even reducing the teen pregnancy rate in the United States (as proved by the economic study discussed in Chapter One).

One aspect of MTV's teen pregnancy programming that I mentioned above as a limitation of my own work is how the racial, ethnic, and class makeup of MTV's casting does not correspond with actual teen pregnancy rates when broken down by race, class, and other identity and demographic markers. While MTV's cast is predominantly white and features girls who, more often than not, have familial support (monetarily and otherwise), broad statistical data on teen pregnancy show that rates are much higher in African American and Hispanic populations with a lower socio-economic status. Essentially, through casting choices, MTV whitewashes the issue of teen pregnancy, perhaps because white, middle class girls make up a substantial portion of the network's audience. MTV's narratives focus on the dramatic and hard lives of (white) teen mothers, ignoring many of the structural inequalities that lead to certain populations of girls getting pregnant as teens more often than others. Additionally, MTV's narratives are

hyper-focused on individual teen mothers and their singular struggles as teen mothers. When more pattern-driven and systemic aspects of teen pregnancy are focused upon, such as the fact that children of teen mothers are more likely to become teen parents themselves, the focus changes to what Dr. Drew, in the reunion specials discussed in Chapter Three, calls the *cycle of teen pregnancy*. The culturally-embedded structures that contribute to this “cycle” are left undiscussed by MTV in any outlet (the shows themselves, reunion shows, etc.), primarily the *cycle of poverty* which sustains the “at-risk” status of lower class, often racially marked, populations of young women.

Lastly, an ever-growing aspect of MTV’s teen pregnancy franchise, as I discussed earlier in this conclusion, is its online component. While the “It’s Your (Sex) Life Campaign” PSA spots, which direct viewers to the campaign’s website, are discussed in existing literature, other online outlets – both official and unofficial – have increasingly become more central to the franchise and deserve analysis. Some examples of the online presence of the franchise (and the featured teen mothers) include Twitter (e.g., individual accounts for each teen mom and for the shows, live tweeting episodes, devoted *Teen Mom* gossip handles, etc.) and online gossip outlets (discussed in Chapter Three). The integration of social media into this franchise creates a different relationship between MTV and its audience that continues multimedia approaches to millennial audiences and the multidirectional flow of discourse in contemporary media culture. Additionally, the continual tabloid and gossip coverage of MTV’s featured teen mothers both contributes to the consistent exploitation and construction of them as postfeminist failures. It also fuels the celebrity status some of them have achieved through such media coverage of

their lives, in traditional paper tabloid press and on online forums like Twitter, blogs, and gossip websites.

MTV's teen pregnancy franchise has grown immensely since *16 and Pregnant* first aired in 2009. The program, and then franchise, became successful through focusing on the continual failures of the teen mothers. This focus has, as a result, persisted over time and through the texts and paratexts under the umbrella of MTV's teen pregnancy programming. The cultural resonance between MTV's messaging and larger discourses around "the problem of teen pregnancy" complement each other well, especially when considered in tandem. MTV's franchise can be seen as serving as a cautionary tale against teen pregnancy, which proponents of "family values" have argued for years: that teen pregnancy ruins a young women's life. The franchise's generic engagement with the norms of reality television only heightens the surveillance and (sexual) shaming the featured teen mothers experience. It is unfortunate that this negative message is the dominant one that continually emerges as a takeaway message from a franchise of programming that claims to be educating its at-home audience. Indeed, this education is clearly only about how and why to not get pregnant at sixteen.

Nonetheless, at least MTV's franchise has opened up conversations about contraception, adoption, adolescent sexuality, and more, thereby serving to combat the abstinence-only education that dominates conservative areas of the United States. Yet, as evidenced through the lack of conversations about abortion discussed in this Conclusion, more conversations – and broader conversations – need happen in public forums around controversial topics that pertain to teen pregnancy. Hopefully at some point in the near

future networks like MTV that take on programming about hot button issues like teen pregnancy will be able to move away from dominant cultural discourses and present these social issues and the people who grapple with them in a manner that does not demean and exploit the subjects who are featured. It would be a breath of fresh air to see a sustained account of a teen mother who exemplifies postfeminist success rather than those who continually demonstrate postfeminist failures.



## APPENDIX: ANALYZED VISUAL CONTENT

*16 and Pregnant.* MTV. MTVP, Los Angeles. Television.

“Farrah.” Original Air Date: June 18, 2009. Season 1, Episode 2.

“Life After Labor Finale Special.” Original Air Date: July 24, 2009. Season 1.

“Kayla.” Original Air Date: December 7, 2010. Season 2, Episode 17.

“Life After Labor Finale Special.” Original Air Date: December 28, 2010. Season 2.

“Jamie.” Original Air Date: May 3, 2011. Season 3, Episode 3.

“Life After Labor Finale Special.” Original Air Date: June 28, 2011. Season 3.

“Lindsey.” Original Air Date: April 10, 2012. Season 4, Episode 4.

“Life After Labor Finale Special.” Original Air Date: June 6, 2012. Season 4.

*No Easy Decision.* MTV. MTVP, Los Angeles. Television. Original Air Date: December 28, 2010.

*Teen Mom.* MTV. MTVP, Los Angeles. Television.

“Fallout.” Original Air Date: December 22, 2009. Season 1, Episode 3.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew.” Original Air Date: February 2, 2010. Season 1.

“Not Again.” Original Air Date: July 20, 2010. Season 2, Episode 1.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew.” Original Air Date: October 19, 2010. Season 2.

“As Long As We’re Together.” Original Air Date: August 30, 2011. Season 3, Episode 9.

“Teen Dad Special.” Original Air Date: September 18, 2011. Season 3.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew, Part 1.” Original Air Date: September 27, 2011. Season 3.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew, Part 2.” Original Air Date: October 4, 2011. Season 3.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew, Part 1.” Original Air Date: September 5, 2012. Season 4.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew, Part 2.” Original Air Date: September 12, 2012. Season 4.

“Amber Behind Bars.” Original Air Date: October 10, 2012. Season 4.

*Teen Mom 2.* MTV. MTVP, Los Angeles. Television.

“Moving In, Moving On.” Original Air Date: February 2, 2011. Season 1, Episode 4.

“Taking Sides.” Original Air Date: February 16, 2011. Season 1, Episode 6.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew.” Original Air Date: April 5, 2011. Season 1.

“Intensive Care.” Original Air Date: December 20, 2011. Season 2, Episode 3.

“Falling.” Original Air Date: February 7, 2012. Season 2, Episode 11.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew, Part 1.” Original Air Date: February 22, 2012. Season 2.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew, Part 2.” Original Air Date: February 29, 2012. Season 2.

“Mid-Season Reunion.” Original Air Date: February 12, 2013. Season 3.

“Under Pressure.” Original Air Date: February 19, 2013. Season 4, Episode 1.

“The Future is Now.” Original Air Date: March 5, 2013. Season 4, Episode 3.

“Sweet Dreams.” Original Air Date: April 9, 2013. Season 4, Episode 9.

“Hardknocks.” Original Air Date: April 23, 2013. Season 4, Episode 11.

“The End of the Road.” Original Air Date: April 30, 2013. Season 4, Episode 12.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew, Part 1.” Original Air Date: May 5, 2013. Season 4.

“Finale Special: A Check Up With Dr. Drew, Part 2.” Original Air Date: May 12, 2013. Season 4.

“Revelations.” Original Air Date: January 22, 2014. Season 5.

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